

Climate Crisis as *Kairos* Moment

David R. Weiss – November 2, 2019

The Gospel in Transition #46 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

Kairos. It means fraught time. Time that is swollen, pregnant, bulging with promise ... or peril. Such is our time today.

The word is Greek. Both *kairos* and *chronos* mean “time” in Greek, but only *chronos* made its way into English (e.g., “chronology”). *Chronos* indicates time, second by second: clock time, calendar time, *ordinary time*. On the other hand, *kairos* indicates time in its most consequential mode. We *know* time in this dimension, too, but because we lack a way to clearly name it, our culture tends to let the gravity of such moments be carried by awkward whispers rather than by clear discourse. Which is not helpful when so much is at stake: in *kairos* time, decisions—from personal to political, individual to communal, neighborhood to government, consumer to corporate—are decisive, even fateful. And not because we vest them with power, but because *the larger forces of the given moment make them so*.

For this reason *kairos* time is precarious. Choosing to play it safe in such moments is not simply unwise—it’s impossible. There is no safety. Everything is at risk. And there are wise risks, foolish risks, communal risks, selfish risks, generous risks, perhaps even evil risks. *But safety is off the table*.

In the Bible *kairos* often means a moment of promise or possibility. Jesus begins his preaching by declaring, “The time/*kairos* is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent (literally: “reverse course”) and believe the good news” (Mark 1:15). Similarly, Paul writes (2 Cor. 6:2), “Now is the acceptable time/*kairos*; behold now is the day of salvation (literally: the day of wholeness).”

But *kairos* is a necessarily *participatory* moment. We must act in response. To decide to “wait and see” rather than “repent and believe” is not simply a missed opportunity; it’s potentially a missed lifetime. Jesus chides the crowds (Matt. 16:2-3; Luke 12:54-56) for knowing how to read the sky and the wind to tell the weather—and choose wisely in response to what they read there—but then failing “to read the signs of the times/*kairos*,” that is, the mood of the day, with its social-political-religious ramifications. The edge in Jesus’ voice is because he knows how much is at stake. The promise is real—the peril just as much so. A short time later when Jesus weeps over Jerusalem, he laments that the city “does not know the things that make peace” but has instead sealed its coming devastation “because you did not know the time/*kairos* of your visitation” (Luke 19:44).¹³⁴

Today we stand collectively—from individuals and families all the way up to governments, societies, and our very species—in *kairos*. Fraught time. Bulging with peril. Barely hinting at promise. In fact, in something that approaches ironic overstatement, the climate crisis (itself a looming catastrophe entangled with other crises) is a moment when “the signs of the times” (the evidence of the momentous choices we face) are—in many ways—read in the sky and on the wind.

The climate *kairos* is also exponentially *present time*: a moment almost apocalyptically disconnected from our past (although it clearly has roots back there). But to the extent that the climate crisis is redefining how weather happens, how ice melts, how oceans rise, how wild fires rampage, how crops grow, how cities flood and refugees move, how ecosystems (and their inhabitants) creep to more hospitable latitudes or collapse if they cannot—to that extent this climate crisis ushers in a whole new world. Meaning there is no guarantee that the values that seemed to serve us well in the past will be

¹³⁴ While *kairos* entered my vocabulary in first year Greek at Wartburg College in 1978, its theological nuances were filled out during my seminary years. The passages referenced here are used to explain *kairos* in *Kairos: Three Prophetic Challenges to the Church* (ed. Robert McAfee Brown, Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1986), pp. 3-4. That book explores how the contemporary Christian Church has summoned its followers to discern and live in response to *kairos* moments of the 1980’s (e.g., apartheid in southern Africa as well as the violence and political repression in Central America, Africa, and Asia).

helpful in the world now opening before us. Some values that proved “successful” in the former world might be counter-productive now. Less noble values that were tolerable then might be deadly today. And other values that were unheralded in that earlier world may well be prove to be the ones most vital today. Who knows?

But the persons we choose to be today (even as we merely muddle forward)—the values that we affirm, the pathways we open up ... and the possibilities we foreclose—will significantly set the parameters for the options our children and grandchildren have before them. The past guarantees them *nothing* now. Thus, for those of us alive today, *kairos* is *soul time*. Because the choices we make—at all levels—define our soul. Reveal our mettle. Crystalize our character. Decisively shape our identity. *Image our God*. We choose either to align ourselves with grief ... or denial, with hope or fear, with love or hate, with spirit or despair. *Kairos* is time that will be made holy or unholy (life-giving or death-dealing)—by us.

Churches are not the only communities that can perceive, announce, and shape a response to *kairos* time. But because churches are committed to care for the well-being of the world, foster just and life-giving community, and shape personal character, they have a profound stake in recognizing *kairos* time and responding to it.

And because the stakes of this *kairos* moment are so high, churches ought to welcome every possible partnership and every source of wisdom in meeting this moment. Over the remaining six essays in this first year’s cycle I want to return to the Transition Town Movement and consider more closely the wisdom it offers to progressive Christian theology in responding to the climate crisis that is our common *kairos* moment.¹³⁵

Even though the Transition Town Movement does not use the term *kairos*, it represents a deeply thoughtful and implicitly spiritual attempt to respond to its own acute perception of *kairos*: time strained by climate crisis in ways that *will* remake us ecologically, and also socially, politically, and spiritually. This remaking is no longer optional (if it ever was). And many of the dimensions of this remaking will be determined not by human preferences, but by physics, chemistry, and biology—processes that will play out impersonally, relentlessly, and ruthlessly.

But there is a response for us to make in the midst of this remaking that is larger than us. And that our response might have integrity, compassion, grace, and a measure of beauty and joy—this is yet possible. But not guaranteed.

Kairos names the precarious possibility that is NOW. My job is to help us seize that possibility with a faith that inspires us to the best that we can be. Now that safety is off the table, it’s time for wisdom, imagination, resolve, and compassion to have their turn.

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¹³⁵ There are other movements besides Transition Town that also aim to support a personal-communal response to the perception of a climate *kairos*. Extinction Rebellion and Deep Adaptation are among them; and they also have profound spiritual resonances. I may explore these in future essays.

From *Kairos* to the Transition Town Movement

David R. Weiss – November 7, 2019

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In February 1979 scientists from fifty nations gathered in Geneva for the First World Climate Conference, sponsored by the UN's World Meteorological Organization. On Tuesday (11/05/2019), and in commemoration of the 40th anniversary of that conference, the journal *BioScience* published a piece titled, "Warning of a Climate Emergency."¹³⁶

The statement's opening paragraph begins, "Scientists have a moral obligation to clearly warn humanity of any catastrophic threat" and concludes, "we declare clearly and unequivocally that planet Earth is facing a climate emergency." Drafted by five lead authors with 31 contributing reviewers, it proceeds to do just that, announcing that we—that is, *all of us*—are at risk of "untold suffering." It sums up the situation using a couple dozen graphs that track key data from 1979 to present. Arranged in two groupings, the graphs show (a) an escalating pace of "excessive consumption" by humanity's wealthier members (that's really middle-class Americans and better—and those with comparable lifestyles across the globe); and (b) the "climatic response" to that pace of consumption. It's not pretty.

The authors note that despite forty years of increasing scientific knowledge and ongoing climate negotiations, governments, business, and societies as a whole have "generally conducted business as usual and have largely failed to address this predicament." Which is a big problem, because they join the IPCC in telling us that only "major transformations in the ways our global society functions and interacts with natural ecosystems" will lead to a "just transition to a sustainable and equitable future." Succinctly, "To secure a sustainable future, we must change how we live." Now.

And now means *NOW*: "The climate crisis has arrived and is accelerating faster than most scientists expected. It is more severe than anticipated, threatening natural ecosystems and the fate of humanity." Then you can download a file listing the *more than 11,000 scientist signatories* representing a wide range of specialties from 153 countries around the world. In a scientific community where independent—and competing—views are prized, the depth of consensus on this strong statement is remarkable. To an alarming degree.

Voices like theirs represent a veritable cloud of witnesses and confirm that this is truly a *kairos* moment (See GIT #46)—overfull with both peril and promise and awaiting a clear response from a faithful church. I believe as the church awakens, not simply to the call of care for creation but also to this alarm of climate crisis, that it should avail itself of wisdom and insight from the Transition Town Movement. This movement offers a response that fashions promise in the midst of peril, prioritizes the potential in local communities, and resonates in some profound ways with the Christian tradition.

Over the next several essays, as I close out my first year of weekly blogging, I'll explore the Transition Town Movement more carefully and explain why I regard it as an especially crucial and creative conversation partner for people of faith as we take our place among others in responding to climate crisis by becoming communities of solidarity and resistance, imagination and resilience.¹³⁷

Rob Hopkins co-founded the first Transition Town in Totnes, England in 2006, but the roots of Transition go back several years earlier.¹³⁸ In the mid-90's Hopkins first studied and then began

¹³⁶ www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/nov/05/climate-crisis-11000-scientists-warn-of-untold-suffering; find the full statement here: <https://academic.oup.com/bioscience/advance-article/doi/10.1093/biosci/biz088/5610806>.

¹³⁷ The phrase "communities of solidarity and resistance" echoes the thought of Sharon Welch in *Communities of Resistance and Solidarity: A Feminist Theology of Liberation* (Orbis Books, 1985; reprinted, Wipf and Stock, 2017). "Resilience" is the cardinal virtue of Transition, naming the capacity of local systems or communities to bounce back from destabilizing events by cultivating the ability to think on their feet, adapt on the fly, anticipate impending shocks, and even seize such moments as opportunities for growth. www.transitionnetwork.org/news-and-blog/building-resilience

¹³⁸ The background here is from Rob Hopkins, *The Transition Handbook: From oil dependency to local resilience* (White River Junction, Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2008).

teaching permaculture design. That experience became one of the building blocks of Transition. Permaculture itself (which I explore a bit more in GIT #26-28) was born in the oil crisis of the 1970's and began as an effort to liberate food production from its heavy reliance on fossil fuels. Originally conceived as "permanent agriculture," it's a method of agricultural design focused on learning *from* and working *with* Earth's natural proclivities to grow food in dense, diverse "food forests." It eventually broadened to an overall philosophical approach to living in (relative) harmony with the planet on multiple levels, still rooted in food production, but encompassing all facets of human life and culture.

On a practical level, permaculture is a scientific approach that looks to Earth's history as a storehouse of accumulated wisdom (even if you "only" use trial-and-error, over eons trial-and-error can teach you a lot!) and a model of resilience. And although permaculture grew out of passionate engagement with, careful observation of, and deep respect for Earth's natural systems (and not in response to any sacred text), as I explain in GIT #26, it represents a viewpoint *profoundly at home in a faith tradition that affirms Wisdom as an active principal in creation.*

Hopkins was teaching permaculture courses where he encountered the idea of "peak oil" in 2004. Beginning in the late 1950's peak oil made waves by predicting the near-term "peak" of global oil production—the point at which we had extracted *half* of all the oil that was technologically and economically accessible across the globe. After hitting "peak," oil production would (slowly but irreversibly) decline ... forever, while the price of oil would (perhaps less slowly but just as irreversibly) rise ... forever. For an entire civilization built on fossil fuel, peak oil is a huge threat. It declares—in unmistakable terms—that an end to our growth is on the doorstep. We won't run out of oil when we hit peak, but the cost of all the remaining oil will begin to move beyond the reach of all but the wealthy. It's like knowing an impending super-charged hurricane will hit—and soon, even if you can't predict its exact path. In the circles where it held (holds) currency, peak oil marked the entry into an era we were (are) utterly unprepared to navigate. It's a recipe for conflict and chaos.

Various dates have been projected for peak oil by analyzing known oil reserves, production, and demand, etc. Some of the earliest projections put peak oil in the 2000's. Obviously that didn't happen, primarily "thanks" to new technology that enabled us to access more oil—but in much more ecologically costly ways, like tars sands oil and fracking. Currently, the projected date for peak oil ranges from the 2020's to the 2040's. But peak oil *is* out there. Just waiting to turn life as we take it for granted *entirely upside down.*

Hopkins had already been teaching permaculture design for four years in Kinsdale, Ireland (a small community of about 2300) when he learned about peak oil and realized the threat it posed. He immediately saw the value of his permaculture training in responding to peak oil—as well as to the looming reality of climate change. The Transition Town Movement was born in that ferment.

We're still mid-story, but I should wrap things up and resume the tale next time. Just to remind you, there is *MUCH* more going on here than a simple account of the birth of an interesting social change movement. Peak oil and climate crisis are ultimately stories about human alienation from the natural world—what we in the church might call our fractured, sin-twisted relationship with creation. And permaculture hearkens back to the voice of God's Wisdom, which *still* daily declares the goodness of creation. And, as I will argue in the weeks ahead, Transition Towns offer a glimpse of communities animated by a renewed vision of life abundant and determined to seek the good the world around them. *That's gospel.* As churches we should be sitting up and paying attention.

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***Kairos* and the Core Convictions of Transition**

David R. Weiss – November 19, 2019

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This essay builds on my last post (GIT #47) about the Transition Town Movement. As said then, I'm convinced this is a *kairos* moment (GIT #46) for humanity as a whole—a time when the choices we make, individually and collectively, at all levels and in all places—will decisively shape the future ... for everyone on the planet ... and for generations to come. Faith communities have a particular responsibility because the skills needed in this *kairos* moment are among those that faith communities are distinctly suited to offer (which is not to say we're the only ones able to do so, or even that we're actually offering them—only that we *could!*). And there are insights in the Transition Movement that faith communities can learn from. That's why we're here.

To pick up from where I left off last time, in 2004 as Rob Hopkins became aware of the intertwined threats of peak oil (see GIT #47 for more on this) and climate change, he saw his training in permaculture as offering a powerful resource in shaping a community response.¹³⁹ So he assigned his permaculture students in Kinsdale, Ireland (pop. 2300) a course project of developing an “energy descent plan” for Kinsdale. Recognizing that any response to peak oil and climate change would *require* that communities dramatically lessen their dependence on fossil fuel, he asked his students to put their minds to imagining how to do this over the next fifteen years. That is, to reduce Kinsdale's reliance on fossil fuels to one fourth of its then current use. The project goal was to produce a vision for a post-carbon Kinsdale that would be an *even more desirable community* to live in—and to launch the Kinsdale community itself into conversation about its future.

Although this was not yet a full-blown Transition initiative, Hopkins' first foray into fashioning a positive, inviting community response to the challenge of living sustainably on a finite planet was a crucial learning experience for everyone involved. The students' final result, the Kinsdale Energy Descent Plan, was never fully adopted in its original 2005 form, but it planted seeds for countless conversations and eventually led to Kinsdale becoming a Transition Town the following year.

Meanwhile, in 2005 Hopkins himself moved to Totness, England (pop. 8500). There he built on his Kinsdale experience and partnered closely with Naresh Giangrande, a peak oil educator, to create a Transition Town process more intentionally from the ground up—and as a community project rather than a campus one. Beginning in fall 2005 they used a whole series of community events to carefully lay the groundwork for a community-wide “unleashing” of Transition Town Totness in September 2006. This was followed by an entire year of further community-strengthening events ranging from educational to transformational. Since that birth of the Transition Town idea, over a thousand Transition initiatives have been undertaken in countries around the globe.

The Transition Town Movement has certainly matured as it has played out over time and spread to new settings, but it remains remarkably true to Hopkins original vision, which was to bring the insights of permaculture from their largely rural setting into town, villages, and cities. His conviction remains that as people in all settings begin to awaken to just how “not right” things are, the principles of permaculture can do much more than guide us in how we tend the land; they can also inspire us to tend our communities—our entire cultures—with renewed earth-offered wisdom.

Transition identifies three major crises facing humanity today. (In truth, there are more than just three, but these three intersect with many more—both amplifying and being amplified by them—so I don't want to get tripped up by asking whether these three are the “top” three. Each is decisive, multifaceted, and reaches far. The first is peak oil, which acknowledges the extent to which our lives

¹³⁹ The background here is from Rob Hopkins, *The Transition Handbook: From oil dependency to local resilience* (White River Junction, Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2008), especially pp. 122-145; supplemented by the Transition US website: www.transitionus.org.

are unsustainably swimming in fossil fuel—and anticipates the coming crash when those fuels become scarce and costly. The second is the climate crisis, which is, of course, driven primarily by our use of fossil fuel, but this crisis is concerned with the multitude of ways that a changing climate will wreak havoc on our lives and on Earth’s ecosystems and creatures.

The third crisis the economic crisis, which is hardest to capture in words. In its most abstract form, it names the dangerous extent to which money has taken on a life of its own today: as global economic relations exist largely independent of real world products and services. The sheer weight of debt servicing and speculative investments as a share of the economy make the economic foundation of actual lives more volatile and precarious. It’s as though economic growth is a Jenga tower built ever higher only by making the base ever more likely to fall. This plays out in rising inequality, excruciating poverty, unemployment and economic displacement, etc. When money takes on a life of its own, *human* life is diminished from every angle.

These crises, which conspire to pose an existential threat to countless species, human society, and humanity itself, reflect what Christian faith has called sin. They expose our profound alienation from creation/nature, one another, and the sacred. But such a claim needs to be explored with nuance because one wide swath of Christianity has twisted sin into mere personal (often sexual) morality and reduced the arc of God’s work into a fall-redemption plot where Jesus’ primary purpose is to be killed. *I mean none of that*, and it will take a post of its own just to *begin* that exploration. But Christianity HAS language to name the dynamics behind these crises, and that means Christianity *might* be capable of rousing its members to respond in this *kairos* moment.

Transition also holds four key assumptions. (1) Finitude (seen in both peak oil and climate crisis) means any future other than death *requires* much lower energy consumption—and, knowing this, we’re wiser to *plan for it* rather than crash the system. (2) Our communities presently lack the *resilience* (think: imaginative-practical agility-adaptability) either to make the swift shift in our lives that is needed or to respond to the crash when it comes. (3) Individual actions (while necessary) are insufficient and government actions (while also necessary) are politically tenuous and practically slow, therefore *collective action*—by friends, neighbors, and fellow citizens—to build community resilience and to plan for and move toward a post-carbon life is *indispensable* to any future in which human society (and some semblance of a “healthy” ecosystem) might persist. (4) If we “unleash the collective genius” in our communities today—ideas, skills, stories, visions, etc.—it would be *possible*, not only to weather the worst of what’s headed our way, but even to fashion new patterns of life together in which joy and justice flourish on a finite planet.

Each of these assumptions—again, to be explored in another post—can be embraced within faith communities. Although church membership today is far more geographically scattered than in earlier eras (especially in urban areas), churches remain communities where this type of collective action could find a natural habitat. And, because these assumptions speak to the salvation (that is, the healing) of the planet and its people, churches that choose to explore what it means to be faith-based Transition communities, have the opportunity to revitalize their internal faith and energy, while also recovering a sense of external purpose that the world actually needs.

Right now. Because a *kairos* moment demands nothing less.

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Reckoning Where We Are: Entangled

David R. Weiss – November 22, 2019

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You *can* find good news on climate concerns. Our solar panels are having the sunniest day since being turned on. A recent breakthrough in solar technology has shown that sunshine can be harnessed with sufficient intensity to drive industrial processes like making steel, glass, or concrete.¹⁴⁰ And Sweden, through a program based in one of its public research universities, has hired a Chief Storyteller to help craft a public engaging and inspiring narrative for their Viable Cities program.¹⁴¹

These are all remarkable things in their own way. And good news feels *good*. But I fear we also need a much stronger medicine, because remarking on the technological breakthroughs in the construction of the Titanic or even commenting on the inspiring music being played by the ship’s ensemble won’t keep you from getting sunk by an iceberg. And Transition reminds us that even while bits of good news trickle out—and are worth noticing and celebrating—the larger picture is undeniably ominous.

While Transition is absolutely about shaping a *positive* vision for a sustainable future, that future is only positive, only sustainable, if it reckons honestly the gap between our present and that future. And overall the news is not kind to us on climate issues—or any other facet of forging a sustainable future on the finite planet we call home. (And that last phrase, while colloquial, also betrays the very disconnect that betrays us these days. It doesn’t do any good to “call” Earth home if we don’t really mean it, or act like it. And, bottom line, it isn’t ours to “call” at all. “Call” suggests *choice*, as though we picked Earth from a list of options. But there are no other planets available. Earth IS our home. And a large part of the gap between collapsing present and sustaining future lies in that faulty notion.)

The latest IPCC report highlights the size of that gap.¹⁴² These IPCC reports—because they represent the consensus of many studies and authors—inevitably present *moderate* assessments. And when moderate assessments sound *alarming*, it gets increasingly difficult to find a foothold for even cautious optimism. This last report, released in late September, looks at Earth’s oceans and ice regions as one key player in the climate crisis. It states soberly that if we do not hold temperature increase below 1.5 C, “the same oceans that nourished human evolution are poised to unleash misery on a global scale.” *Remember, that’s the moderate angle.*

And it echoes earlier IPCC reports in telling us that limiting temperature rise to 1.5 C rests on making “rapid, far-reaching, and unprecedented” changes in nearly every facet of our lives. This is now so close to a political impossibility as to practically make limiting the increase to 2.0 C our best hope right now. We’re likely to crest 1.5 C in the *next 10-30 years* and we may well be flirting disastrously with 2.0 C before this century ends. Which means we should brace ourselves for the report’s somber (again, “moderate”!) predictions. Sea level rise will rewrite coastlines and submerge coastal cities, displacing industry and some 280 million people—quadrupling our already record-high refugee count. Political borders will be battered by waves, both watery and human.

The biggest change we need to make is to reduce our use of fossil fuels as swiftly as possible. Honestly, we need to do it, *not* without disrupting our economy, but (ideally) without crashing it. *Disruption is the price of survival.* Unfortunately, we’re not willing to pay that price yet. A recent report by the UN Environment Programme analyzed the announced coal, oil, and gas production plans of the world’s

¹⁴⁰ www.cnn.com/2019/11/19/business/heliogen-solar-energy-bill-gates/index.html; still, this breakthrough includes a measure of ambiguity. If it slows fossil fuel use without shifting the way we see ourselves on the planet, it will simply provide a “scorched-Earth” means to destroy the planet that doesn’t require oil.

¹⁴¹ www.citylab.com/environment/2019/11/climate-change-news-solutions-per-grankvist-viable-cities/601597/

¹⁴² See www.nymag.com/intelligencer/2019/08/leaked-un-draft-warming-oceans-could-unleash-misery.html; IPCC is the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. The full report is here: www.ipcc.ch/srocc/home.

countries over the next decade.¹⁴³ As of today we're still *planning*—HOPING?!—to extract more than TWICE the amount of fossil fuels that would keep us at the safest 1.5 C increase and 50% more than would even keep us at 2 C—the point characterized by the IPCC report above as “unleashing misery on a global scale.” We are *planning*, by 2030, to have locked in global catastrophic consequences.

Considering only our own fates, *this is sheer madness*. Considering all whose lives and wellbeing is at stake today and in the future, *this is sheer evil*. It matters little that this path toward *chosen collapse* is built into our societal structures and beyond our personal reach. When it reaches our doorsteps, our families, our grandchildren, our claims to powerlessness will mean nothing and save no one. Either we find ways to become persons with the power to act—which is what Transition Towns are all about—or we become complicit in the choice to assault the planet.

Of course, *we already are*. We were born into patterns of consumption, habits of living, assumptions of comfort and convenience that were misshapen long before we realized it. Long before we became aware of the threat. Or the extent to which those patterns entangle us with others beyond our view.

The worst consequences of global heating will (*already do*) fall disproportionately on “the least of these”—those living in less industrialized countries who are least responsible for carbon emissions and least equipped to respond ... those in whom Jesus says we encounter him today. And it's much more than just climate consequences. The searing inequities of the globalized economy are fundamental to the misshapen patterns that define our lives. Some of this, which Transition clearly calls out, involves the way that high finance drives down wages and makes employment more precarious right here in our communities. But it's equally true that the consumer culture, driven by industrialized capitalism, weds us ever more deeply to injustice against our more distant neighbors.

Is “neighbors” the right word for those we never really see? Yes—given their intimate connection to our lives. Two examples suffice, drawn from the past week's news. A BBC report describes a pair of villages in Indonesia where villagers practice subsistence “farming”: by sorting through mixed plastics sent by Western countries to be recycled. Only the best plastic can be “harvested”; the rest is burned as fuel by local industry. So these “neighbors”—after all, it's the plastic *we* recycle from *our* consumer choices that ends up in their village—deal with respiratory ailments from toxic fumes released by the burning plastic and eat chicken eggs with dioxin levels 70 times higher than considered safe.¹⁴⁴

Meanwhile, in Madagascar children as young four years old “work” long hours—day and night—in makeshift mines collecting shards of mica. Some of it winds up as the sparkle in the cosmetics on your face. Most finds its way to China and then to the U.S. in the hair dryers that style our hair or the audio speakers that play our music (though it also shows up in an array of products that populate our everyday lives—although they'd be unimaginable to the children crawling through the darkness).¹⁴⁵

We are *entangled* in a web of relationships, a system of structures that expects us to use oil like there's no tomorrow. To use people like they're not human. To use the planet as though it were not our (ONLY) home. Christians have language for this, though as I said last time, we'll need to reclaim it from those who've cheapened it. *We are entangled in sin*. And next time I'll turn to that.

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¹⁴³ www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/nov/20/fossil-fuel-production-on-track-for-double-the-safe-climate-limit

¹⁴⁴ www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-50392807

¹⁴⁵ www.nbcnews.com/news/all/army-children-toil-african-mica-mines-n1082916

Sin: Ripping the Fabric of Creation

David R. Weiss – November 26, 2019

The Gospel in Transition #50 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

My last post ([GIT #49](#)) left us *entangled*. But if we're so thoroughly caught in systems that pit us against each other, our fellow creatures, and even our planet, what hope do we have? We'll get there (to hope), but the first step toward that hope is realizing how *not right* things are.

I used the word *sin* to describe our entanglement—the *not-rightness* of our current situation—but that's hardly an uncomplicated word choice. "Sin" feels too religious for folks not connected to a faith community and too oppressively moralistic for many who are in faith communities. I could pick a different word, but I think *sin* is our word for a couple of reasons.

First, for better or for worse, *sin* is the word used in the Christian tradition to name the *not-rightness* that afflicts human experience. And if we're going to leverage the wisdom of the Christian tradition to address the *not-rightness* evident in the climate crisis, we should at least ask whether we're dealing with *sin*, since that's the *not-rightness* that Christianity aims to address.

Second, *sin* is also the word *misused* in the Christian tradition to narrow down that *not-rightness* to matters of personal morality, sexual shame, rule-based obedience, and othering (disvaluing those who are simply different). While there are legitimate expressions of personal morality and times for rule-based obedience, overall in its misused form *sin* has largely reinforced power relationships without ever asking about the *not-rightness* of the relationships themselves. In this manner *sin* has actually distracted us from recognizing the *not-rightness* that really matters. Because of this, it seems wiser to reclaim *sin* than simply coin a new term and allow "sin" to simmer away in the background—pointing fingers, sowing shame, and otherwise making noise that doesn't help us address the crisis in front of us.

Third, I'm convinced that a reclaimed understanding of *sin* can help us understand what we're up against and help us see how our tradition can guide us in this *kairos* moment ([GIT #46](#)). That is, only by being clear on what *sin* is, can we begin to draw on Christianity as a faith with the power to transform us both inwardly and outwardly: *this is the work of Transition*.

Let me be clear: the Transition Movement does NOT require a background in any faith tradition. And I'm certain faith traditions other than Christianity can benefit from engaging with Transition. My assertion is more modest but important: for Christianity to engage Transition in a meaningful and constructive way we need to recognize the "touch points"—places where Transition and Christianity come together. And what Transition sees as the *not-rightness* of the current moment—the crises of peak oil, climate chaos, and a misshapen economy—are the result of what Christians name as *sin*. We have *much* to learn from Transition, and we begin with remembering what we know about *sin*.¹⁴⁶

A mini-theology. Reality is relational. Nothing is on its own. (Perhaps not even God; that seems to be one core intuition in the doctrine of the Trinity: even God is intrinsically intimate before anything else at all is.) This begs the question of ultimates: who/what is God? I'm not going there. I'll say this much. "God" is absolutely beyond our words. The very best we can do is seek words that capture shadows of the divine—God's "backside" so to speak (Exodus 33:19-23).

I regard "God" as the name given across multiple faith traditions to the energy that pervades all that is: the "pulse" of the cosmos, the "spark" behind the big bang, the "impulse" to evolve, the "webbedness" that characterizes the very nature of reality. Our minds tend to personalize and anthropomorphize this energy. I'll admit I'm agnostic-skeptical toward this. I doubt "God" is personal, but I'm inclined to affirm a purposiveness that comes right to the edge of sentience, and I'm adamant that I don't really

¹⁴⁶ People write entire books on *sin*; I have just a couple paragraphs. I'm most indebted to Sallie McFague (*The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*, Fortress Press, 1993, esp. pp. 112-129) and Carter Heyward (*Saving Jesus From Those Who Are Right*, Fortress Press, 1999, esp. pp. 82-88) for helping me articulate my own intuitions more clearly.

know. But, even if you prefer a fully personal God, my assertion stills stands: whoever/whatever God is, God's creation—the cosmos—is relational through and through. This is, I believe, both a theological truth and an empirical fact; a happy place where religion and science simply concur.

This claim is the canvas for any serious religious cosmology. Cosmology (more/less in *both* its religious and scientific form, though I'm speaking religiously here) means the big picture of how/why things came to be as they are, where WE fit, and how WE ought to act in light of this big picture. In this sense, cosmologies are inescapably "self-centered" in that that they orient US—the ones who fashion them, toward the world around us. But they need not be destructively self-centered. It is possible (I'd say critical-essential!) for a cosmology grounded in a big picture of cosmic relationality to be self-centered in a humble, searching posture that places us within—interwoven with—a web of relationships rather than atop a pyramid. At its best, that's what Christianity might offer.

In this cosmology, *every facet* of the cosmos from birth to death (both individually and as a whole) is *naturally* in ebb and flow with everything else. Life and death, renewal and rebirth, are the respiration of the universe. This is a far more modest picture than Christianity has often proclaimed, but it's more consonant with what we know scientifically. "Paradise" may be a useful myth-metaphor, but there's *never* been a time when any corner of the universe, least of all "Eden," has been without the tumult that is nature. That tumult—which includes predator-prey relationships and lots of death—isn't a moral problem. It simply *is* the way this universe works.

But at some point, on this particular planet, life evolved to the point that self-consciousness dawned. And with the notion of a self came the notion of an *ended self*—the anticipation of death; then anxiety over this finitude and then all manner of methods of trying to avoid death, many of which come at the expense others. As the Christian theologian Reinhold Niebuhr (d. 1971) said, contrary to the "fall narrative" in the Bible, we don't die because we sin; *we sin because we die*. Our failure to respond maturely to the challenges posed by finitude (and they *can* be mighty!) is the primal trigger for *sin*.

But it's critical to note, this *isn't* sin in the form of disobeying God. It's sin in the form of acting against the cosmic relatedness in which we "suddenly" found ourselves, a cosmic relatedness in which our personal-communal finitude posed extreme anxiety. It isn't surprising, perhaps, that self-consciousness caught us off guard in that primal past. But each choice to act or live against the relatedness of the entire cosmos threatened to rip us as a human species—as a human culture—further and further from the host of (finite!) connectedness that is our *home*.

The present crises of peak oil, climate chaos, and a misshapen economy are all distant but distinct echoes of that primal refusal to knowingly embrace our place in the (finite) web of life. By now that chosen refusal has been clothed so well in culture, myth (in fact, religion in its worse expressions), and systemic-corporate structures that we can barely imagine it as a dysfunctional choice. It passes so easily for normal. But it will kill us. All of us, if we don't stem that anxious impulse.

Religion—at its best—has served since ancient times to help us navigate finitude with grace. And that's an essential double entendre: "grace" as *with humble poise* and "grace" as *with a sense of the sheer giftedness of life itself*. From the earliest Goddess religions and aboriginal/indigenous traditions, on through the Taoist, Hindu, and Buddhist traditions, and up through the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions, religion *in its wisest moments* has offered us patterns for embracing this life as sacred in the midst of finitude. That's the wisdom we need to plumb for today.

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

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Speaking of Sin

David R. Weiss – November 30, 2019

The Gospel in Transition #51 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

I don't harp on how entangled ([GIT #49](#)) we are in sin ([GIT #50](#)) to make us feel bad. I suppose at one level I do it to make us *feel* at all. Day in and day out our lives are profoundly out of sync with nature. Some of this is on account of the choices we make; much more is due to the myriad choices *made for us* by the way our society is structured. In either case, that out-of-sync-ness, that not-rightness, that SIN, is killing the very ground of our being. But we barely notice; it passes so easily for *normal*: for "the way life works." And we won't address the not-rightness of our lives until we *feel* it. So I harp.

By the way, "ground of being" is used sometimes in theology to name God: as that sacred presence that is the very foundation upholding us in all that we are. True enough. But at the mundane level of our flesh and blood bodies, it is *Earth*—its elements, ecosystems, and interconnected life forms—that physically-chemically-biologically upholds us as the ground of our being. And our current way of life (even if in ways mostly unseen, unknown, and hidden from us) is ripping asunder this web that upholds us. I won't go so far as to say we're killing God by our actions, *but we ARE assaulting the wisdom of God woven into the fabric of nature ...* and doing so on a scale that threatens to render the planet unable to support us any longer, unable to ground our being. *And still, we barely notice.* So I harp.

Sunday, on the eve of the 25th United Nations Climate Change Conference, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres acknowledged that global efforts to address the climate crisis have thus far been "utterly inadequate." He warned, "The point of no return is no longer over the horizon. *It is in sight and hurtling toward us.*"¹⁴⁷ In fact, some scientists warn that we may have *already crossed* that ominous threshold on several fronts. That is, *we may have passed the first tipping points* that would set in motion unstoppable and cascading changes leading to climate catastrophe.

Writing in the journal *Nature* (Nov. 27, 2019), they said we are on the precipice of "an existential threat to civilisation." Earlier studies had suggested that these irreversible and interconnected "tipping points" (melting ice, rising seas, thawing permafrost, burning forest, drought, coral reef die off, ocean circulation, etc.) were only at play in a worst-case scenario—if temperature rise reached 5C. However, subsequent and more accurate studies now indicate we could pass these tipping points *even before we reach 2C.* We've already warmed the planet by 1C over the past century, and we're currently on track to heat it by total of 3-4C within the next hundred years. One British climate researcher soberly commented on the piece in *Nature*, "The prognosis by Tim Lenton and colleagues is, unfortunately, fully plausible: that we might have already lost control of the Earth's climate."¹⁴⁸

However, if you've watched the news as it offers "glowing" reports of record holiday buying-and-flying over the Thanksgiving weekend, you'd be excused for not realizing *those very same records* are driving us toward a *glowing planet* that will extinguish—or at least wreck—organized human society during the lifetimes of today's children. I personally think that's newsworthy, but somehow it never makes the cut for our ten o'clock news. *That's why I harp on sin.*

But, again, the point *isn't* to make us feel bad. It's to *wake us up* so that we *feel*. Period. Walter Brueggemann, in discussing the Hebrew prophets described them as poets ransacking their language for words and images to evoke a spiritual-emotional response from a people who'd largely surrendered their capacity to feel.¹⁴⁹ Similarly, I'm not interested in using sin language to leave us wracked by guilt. We need, rather, to be *wakened* to perceive (viscerally!) the truth of our situation.

The Transition Movement is comprised almost entirely of persons who have already (largely) awakened to this truth. Churches, however, are comprised mostly of persons who have not. We might

¹⁴⁷ www.apnews.com/7d85d6d7b05c4436b6f4d162f6c06566

¹⁴⁸ www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/nov/27/climate-emergency-world-may-have-crossed-tipping-points

¹⁴⁹ See Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, Fortress Press, 1978, especially pp. 44-61.

think we're "well-informed," but if we're not ready to all-out weep, rage, and act over climate, we're not yet awake. But as we awaken (and we WILL awaken—either quickly now or frantically in an overheated future), sin language of the right sort, will help us link the not-rightness of the present moment to the tradition from which we get our wisdom and healing.

The right sort. Which is to say, sin language that is NOT focused on the risk of going to hell or the fear of pissing off God or even the need for personal salvation. Rather, sin language that is more directly descriptive of the earth-bound consequences of human action (and inaction). Sin language that speaks from the sacred-cosmic truth of absolute-relatedness and planetary-finitude. And sin language that declares simply, unmistakably, and (at least initially) without judgment, that we've stepped out of place with respect to the sturdy-delicate web of relations *that is our home*.

Perhaps there are good psychological-historical reasons for why we long ago hitched "sin" to otherworldly hopes or anxiety over divine anger. (Although I'd argue we should have also long ago grown past these linkages and refined our thinking. Instead, those holding power found ways to use those primal, but immature impulses to control others ... But I digress.) Yet in this *kairos* moment, on this finite planet, *sin is the welcome recognition that we've "missed the mark."*¹⁵⁰

Welcome, because when we recognize Earth as our home, and as we become "literate" in the language of sin, we can use it to name "negative feedback loops"¹⁵¹ that help us re-true our attitudes and behaviors (ultimately, our cultures and societies) so they "fit" our finite context. *Well-declared, sin calls out the places in our lives that need attention—that need "repentance": literally "turning back from"—so that our lives actually support the web of worldly relations and pursue meaning, joy, and justice in ways that strengthen the whole fabric of creation.* That's the original purpose of sin language. And, as Christians, we either reclaim it in this sense or we let it distract us (perhaps with deadly results) from doing the work to which God calls us: the healing of ourselves and the world.

To employ sin language in its proper role means that in our churches and in our daily fellowship with others we'll actually ask together the *welcome* question of what constitutes sin today. And we'll avoid the cultural press to indulge in holiday flying-and-buying—because that behavior is deadly to others. We'll ask honest and restless questions about how much we drive, how we heat our homes, how we shape our diets, etc.—because those behaviors are directly related to a reeling climate. And, as faithful citizens, we'll ask about plans for new pipelines, gas fracking, nuclear plants, etc.—because those societal-corporate behaviors drive the planet toward a dangerous future.

This isn't about finger-pointing (in any case, most of the fingers would point back toward us). And it isn't about making blanket claims (e.g. "Eat vegan or else"); it will require seasoned ethical nuance. It's about recognizing that our future is in peril and we are wiser to ask about our behaviors with authentic earnestness now, rather than find our conversation driven by frenzied panic after a decade of *sinful* procrastination. Speaking of sin is essential as we seek to navigate finitude with grace.

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¹⁵⁰ The biblical words for sin in both Hebrew and Greek mean "to miss the mark." I might suggest, "to act off balance." Another Hebrew word carries the stronger connotation of "rebellion," as though to deliberately "miss the mark" ... out of spite, vengeance, even desire for profit. *The Oxford Companion to the Bible* (Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 696.

¹⁵¹ See, for instance, Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone, *Active Hope* (New World Library, 2012), pp. 66-68.

Speaking of Christ ... as King

David R. Weiss – December 2, 2019

The Gospel in Transition #52 – **Subscribe at www.davidrweiss.com**

Okay, enough on sin. Of course, it's far more complicated than the past couple essays could fully discuss. There are legitimate challenges to distinguish between those earth-wounding actions and attitudes in which we are entangled almost against our will ... and those with which we acquiesce out of habit or selfish convenience ... and those which we embrace with spiteful disregard for the ones who will be impacted. Likewise, there are real differences between choices at the individual/community level and those at the corporate/government level.

I don't underestimate the nuance needed to actually have thoughtful conversations in which we speak of sin as the rending of creation's fabric. But whether these tears in nature's web are outright spiteful or "merely" structural doesn't really matter if they doom our collective future. There is no solace in making a time capsule marked "Open in case of climate emergency" that holds the message, "Sorry, mates, we didn't mean it. We really hoped our actions wouldn't lead to *this*. Oops." Which is why it's exquisitely important that we take our lives—and other lives across the globe, and other species, and lives not yet here—seriously enough to start speaking of sin in ecological earnest. Now.

But the conversation can't stop there. *That* conversation gets us to the *start* of Transition. But the inward and outward transformation that *is* Transition will require something more than just repentance (more than simply "turning back") from the dire not-rightness of our ... *whole* way of life. Indeed, it will require such a thorough transformation, one might even say we'll need to be *reborn*. That's why I think religious language—in my case, *Christian* language—is not just helpful, it's uncannily accurate and evocative. It may prove crucial in closing the gap between nagging/depressed awareness and committed/active responsiveness in regards to climate. And if it does, that won't be a curious side-effect of a tradition supposedly focused on another realm. It will reveal the truth of Christianity all along: that God so loved *this world* as to risk everything to show us how to be *at home here on Earth*.

I started this year-long venture the first week of Advent 2018. Fifty-two weeks later, the last Sunday of the church year is the Festival of Christ the King. So I'll close this blog with some ecologically provocative reflections on Christ ... as king.

The festival of Christ the King was added to the church year by Pope Pius XI in 1925.¹⁵² It was intended specifically to counter the rising ideologies that were seeking to assert their totalitarian reign in the world: communism in Russia, fascism in Italy and Spain (which soon after shape-shifted into Nazism in Germany)—as well as secularism in the West, which allowed capitalism to grow unfettered, in effect colonizing the minds of consumers and re-colonizing much of the world through the globalization of market forces. The impulse was perhaps noble—each of those ideologies has wrought havoc on humanity and the planet—but the messaging was also off the mark.

Even when invoked as a way to challenge other dangerous regimes, the church's notion of Christ's kingship has been deeply problematic on its own terms—shaped far more by the church's own authoritarian aspirations than by Jesus' actual life. The church has rarely had a problem with top-down or absolute power; it's just preferred to have a monopoly on it. But Jesus' own teachings and his lived practice stand in stark contrast to that preference.

Most biblical scholars agree that Jesus talked—a lot—about "the kingdom of God." It's recorded as the lead-in to quite a few of his parables and shows up elsewhere in his discourse. He *never* sets himself up as king, but setting that aside, it does seem that he imagines God as king—only big, better, more powerful than any earthly king. And if the church later saw fit to transfer that crown on to Jesus, that's maybe legitimate. EXCEPT. To the extent we allow Jesus to reveal God through what *he* says and

¹⁵² Frank Senn, an eminent Lutheran liturgical theologian, offers a concise helpful history of the feast here: www.lutheranforum.com/blog/2017/11/11/the-not-so-ancient-origins-of-christ-the-king-sunday

does, Jesus seems to be so *severely critiquing* the worldly notion of kingship as to announce that, when it comes to kings, *the world has it ALL wrong*.

Jesus' focus on compassion, inclusion, humility, nonviolence, and radical transformative love as the manifestation of God's kingdom suggests that earthly kings—almost to a person—are mere *tyrants*. They traffic in the sort of power *rejected* by heaven: power that belittles, exploits, excludes, others those who are different, and in general operates as though disconnected from all else. Omnipotence is NOT a trait of God; it is *cosmic heresy* (it flies in the face of *everything* the universe reveals about the nature of inter-related reality). It's rather the sinful desire of humans who project it onto divinity and then think they have permission to image it themselves.

This archetype of kingship became the ideal for *every person* in their own sphere (even as the spheres were themselves misshapen by gender, racial, ethnic, sexual biases). Under the influence of this notion of kingship whole peoples have been colonized, Christianized, and decimated. The toll on other creatures and ecosystems has been no less devastating. Even when the church makes Jesus "King" for the "best" reasons, it betrays the message he brought—and it compromises the transformative power he sought to share.

When Jesus employed the phrase "kingdom of God" the way he filled those words with meaning *exorcised them of all their royalty*. The phrase is, in a sense, declared meaningless. *From God's perspective there is NO SUCH THING AS A KING*. It's a parasitic expression of humanity; a way of being that rejects the human vocation to image God ... whose image IS compassionate liberating relationship.

I often shift the phrase "kingdom of God" into "kin-dom of God." Jesus' parables, healings, and perhaps most of all his boundary-breaking table fellowship (eating with folks that the social-religious rules of his day dictated he ought not even acknowledge) all work *so hard* against the notion of kingship, that *he seems rhetorically bent on remaking the meaning of the word into something entirely else: choreographing kingship AS kinship*. In the world God created *there are no kings, only kin*. Every corner related to every other corner, from microbes to mountains, from humus to human beings, and everything else as well.

We don't need a festival for some Imperial Christ who only seems to challenge earthly rulers but ends up ultimately reflecting their own worldly dynamic made divine. No. Just as we don't need (and the world can't afford!) a merely reformed capitalism, we don't need (and the world can't afford!) a Christ who is King. *Luckily, Jesus didn't offer us that. He offered us a Christ who is Kin*. A Christ who chose to be in relationship with all he encountered—because how else to embody the wisdom of God who wove the cosmos as one seamless garment? Let Christ be Kin—and let us follow his lead.

The Transition Movement is working hard to imagine, to experiment, to discover what it would look like to live from an awareness of radical kinship. It's time for the church to join that work *as its holy work*. In truth, *it always has been* our work. Jesus didn't come to save us. He came to *heal* us. (It's the *same verb* for "save" and "heal.") The difference is that we've assumed his goal was to save us to another life in another place. But I'm persuaded that his real hope, like most other great religious teachers, was to heal us so that we might dwell well (pursuing meaning, joy, and justice) *as kin* in this holy place. Earth. Our home. The place where all our relations are. May it be so. Amen.

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