Living Skies or Dying Skies?

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Season of Creation III – Sky

Jeremiah 4: 23-28 Russell Mitchell-Walker

We live in the land of the living skies. As people who live in Saskatchewan we appreciate the beauty and grandeur of the sky and how much of it we can see. As we continue with the Season of Creation, today is Sky Sunday where we reflect on the beauty of sky and the impact of climate change on it and us. The beauty and the expansiveness of the prairie sky becomes really evident as we drive through the prairies and especially when we drive into the prairies from Ontario, or out of the mountains and foothills of Alberta. The land opens up and provides a beautiful vista of the sky, which enables us to see for miles including what weather is coming. We have also been treated to amazing displays of the Aurora Borealis this year, that if we didn’t get to witness, we have been able to experience through pictures our friends and family have taken. The sky bears much of the impact of climate change as well. It is into the sky that CO2 and other pollutants are pumped into the atmosphere, which changes the composition of the sky and atmosphere, creating the changes in climate. We witness this most physically when the expansive view is hindered from wildfire smoke and when clouds turn into dangerous thunderstorms and rainfall that produce excessive amounts of rain causing floods and damage. Along with these impacts, we will continue to experience more devastating tornados and hear about horrendous hurricanes, caused by a suffering sky, as it adapts to and responds to the accumulated CO2 and other foreign particles that are being pumped into it. We seem to have not been able to heed the warnings and change our behaviour and reliance on the fossil fuels that are contributing to these disasters.

Jeremiah was familiar with leaders and people not heeding the warnings of impending destruction. Jeremiah has been proclaiming warnings to the people to change their ways of worshipping idols and injustice against the poor or face devastation and destruction of the land which is what is being described in today’s passage. The prophet’s anguish appears to mirror the anguish of God who can’t believe that the people are bent on self destruction. They have had plenty of warnings but do not change. I wonder if that is how God is feeling about us. We have had decades of warnings and even now our leaders of all levels are not taking the action needed to truly transition us away from fossil fuel use, in a fair and just way. While the passage communicates God’s anger and resulting destruction if the people do not change, the focus is more on the people’s resistance to change and the consequences of their actions. For our context today, we don’t believe that God will destroy the earth, but the reality is that our resistance to change, the corporate greed and self interest, and resulting inaction, will and is leading to death and destruction. We need to heed the warnings from climate scientists.

There have been warnings on cigarette packages since 1965, on the devasting effects of nicotine and smoking. However, the decline in smoking rates did not occur until there were public policy changes, including raising cost of cigarettes through taxes and banning smoking in public places. Smoking is no longer as socially acceptable as it was in the 60’s. It is the leaders who made these changes and the leaders who can make the most impact on changing behaviour regarding climate change and preserving our sky and creation. Jeremiah’s message was to the leaders as well, who could have made decisions to ban the idolatry that was happening and address the injustices against the poor. Can our leaders do the same? Are fossil fuels the idol for our time?

In our trip to Montreal this summer, we noticed the difference policy can make with regard to electric vehicles. Having just purchased an electric vehicle and taking the leap to drive it across the country, (after determining there were sufficient charging stations along the way), we noticed the amount of EV’s on the road. In Quebec, there is a significant subsidy or rebate for purchasing EV’s, up to $7000 per vehicle, plus the federal subsidy of $5000. As a result, there were significantly more EV’s there than in Ontario. The infrastructure is very good in both provinces, quite extensive compared to Saskatchewan where I may see one other EV a day, if that. We also have no incentives or subsidies for EV purchases, here in Saskatchewan.

It has been interesting experiencing the comments and conversations we have had since we purchased an EV. I have heard people tell us we are early adopters and great leaders and examples. The problem is, at this point in the climate change reality, we should not be early adopters. There should be many more who have adopted and embraced the change that is needed and purchased or acquired an electric vehicle. I realize the problem as well is the lack of subsidies, infrastructure needed and the continuing myths that are still out there. EV Batteries last 15-20 years, and more and more can be broken down, completely recycled and made into new ones. The vehicles are fast, very comfortable and wonderful to drive. They function well in the winter, granted the range or distance you can travel will go down. Charging takes anywhere from 15 minutes to an hour depending on the amount of charge needed and the speed of the charger. We also need to change our expectations of getting from one place to another as fast as possible. It may be good for us to be getting into the habit of stopping and relaxing every two and half to three hours. This will be easier when charging stations have other amenities around them! All of this is part of heeding the warnings and changing our behaviour.

This week on September 17, it is the feast day of Saint Hildegard of Bingen, a Christian mystic and Benedictine nun from the 12th century. She was noted as proficient in philosophy, musical composition, herbology, medieval literature, cosmology, medicine, biology, theology, and natural history. Her “visions” provided the material for her writing, public speaking, and musical compositions. She made the connection between health and nature, believing the whole of nature pulsing with God’s life-energy. This she named as ‘God’s Greening’ (God’s life-energy at work in everything). God is in everything in nature. If we all held this view, would we be caring for the earth differently? She challenged the leaders of her time who she said were failing in the performance of their spiritual duties with devastating effects for humankind. [She said](https://www.bingen.de/en/hildegard/hildegards-view-of-creation):

"You are night breathing darkness, a stiff-necked people who no longer walk in the light because of your prosperity [...] You only see what yourselves have produced; you only do and leave what you like at the moment [...]. You do not even have eyes in your head, because your works do not shine to men in the fire of the Holy Spirit; you are not able to set a good example. As the winds sweep over the earth, so should you be a spiritual storm [...]. But with your empty posturing, at best you scare away a few flies in summer."

We have had similar prophetic challenges from a young leader around climate change, Greta Thunberg, who told world leaders in 2019 that we need to respond to climate change like “our house is on fire, because it is.” Greta and Hildegard are both harshly critical of the powerful of their time, who - in their view - are recklessly endangering the well-being of the people through negligent behaviour. The consequence of this for both is an energetic call to repentance. Just as God through Jeremiah calls the people to repentance, we too need to repent of our ways that contribute to the devastation of the earth. We will only see things get worse until we begin to heed the warnings and significantly change our ways.

So may we work to preserve the sky, and all of creation in order to honour God in all things. May we encourage our leaders to make the best choices for earth and humanity, and not corporations and greed. May we work for a just transition so those most deeply impacted by moving away from fossil fuels get the training and continued employment they need. May we know that God is with us as we seek to live better, be better, and love better, so our children will be able to enjoy clear skies and God’s beauty and bounty for generations to come.