

This is the twentieth in an occasional pamphlet series of theological reflections on timely challenges facing churches of the Lutheran communion. It is produced by the LWF Department for Theology and Studies, but does not represent official positions of the Lutheran World Federation. You are encouraged to duplicate, translate and use this in local settings. To subscribe to this series, please contact Ursula Liesch at Liesch@lutheranworld.org

WHY ARE EARTH AND GOD ANGRY?

Throughout the world, many people feel that the earth as well as God are angry because of what is happening as a result of climate change. They wonder if God is causing the changes affecting their communities and livelihoods—when their animals are dying, their land no longer produces sufficient food, rivers are drying out or flooding, lands are disappearing and species vanishing. It seems as though the earth, on which human beings have always depended for their livelihood, is increasingly angry at what human beings have been doing to it. The land, plants, waters and air are being destroyed or polluted and robbed of their life-giving powers. What is the future for this world God has created, if God has become so angry with it? Will God destroy it? How will we survive?

Many of these changes have been going on for a long time. But the new awareness today of climate change is a warning bell to wake us up. It reminds us that God is not removed from but intimately related with and through what God has created. As God's creatures, we too are closely interrelated with the rest of creation. If we ignore or violate these relationships that form, give life and sustain us—which at its heart is sin—this results in expressions of anger by the earth and by God. The earth is angry because of the harm we have inflicted on “it”—we have treated earth as an endless storehouse of resources to be used up rather than relating to it with respect for its integrity. God is angry because of God's deep and abiding compassion for us and all of creation. Rather than punishing or destroying, God seeks to correct us, to make the relationships right again, to redeem us and all of creation.

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So what has gone wrong? In climate change pursuits of economic growth, scrambles for wealth and self-centered profit at the expense of the vulnerable, including the earth itself, are converging. It is not only an environmental crisis but a crisis of justice: those whose use of energy resources is only minimal are being affected most dramatically by rising sea levels, air pollution and the exploitation of their natural resources. Further, people in the “developing” world are told that they must develop as have the fossil fuel dependent industrialized countries if they are to prosper. Materialism, consumerism and hedonism are encouraged. These are just some of the factors that affect and break relationships with others, with the rest of creation, and with the Creator. In this sense, climate change is a judgment on what has gone wrong. The earth itself is bearing witness to these perversions of what God intended in creation (Gen 1). The whole of creation is groaning in travail (Rom 8: 22).

Many passages of Scripture vividly reveal God's anger and intent. For example, in the book of Hosea, God is very angry with the people because of how they have followed other gods (such as money and profit). Hosea compares this to a spouse being enraged because of the partner's flagrant betrayal of the promise to be faithful. It is not only God but also the earth who mourns: “There is no faithfulness or loyalty, and no knowledge of God...therefore the land mourns, and all who live in it languish; together with the wild animals and the birds of the air, even the fish of the sea are perishing” (Hos 4:1b, 3) Yet God's commitment is clear: “I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice” (6:6). Instead of destroying the people, God's “compassion grows warm and tender” (11:8). “I will heal their disloyalty; I will love them freely, for my anger has turned from them....they shall again live beneath my shadow, they shall flourish as a garden” (14:4, 7a).

In other words, God's anger does not lead to judgment but to redemption, not just of human beings, but of all creation: “the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Rom 8:21). Because of God's transforming grace, rather than because of fear, we are empowered to change our attitudes, lifestyles and practices—to put things right again. The way things are now cannot continue with “business as usual.” Instead, the God of grace who is active through, with and in nature, is revealing how urgent it is to recover the spiritual significance of valuing our common good with the rest of creation.

Thus, through climate change we are challenged to see new possibilities for reconciliation and restoration within creation, in ways that will benefit *all* rather than just a few. As the African worldview of *ubuntu* conveys, we simply cannot exist apart from others, including from the rest of creation. The reality

of God's redemption is lived out as we pursue greater justice for all. We must move beyond narrow anthropocentric views of life, and embrace more interconnected views in which God, human beings and the rest of creation are intimately related. When we do so, the injustices imposed on other communities or other realms of creation become all too apparent, as well as our capacity for putting things right again.

Various indigenous worldviews and wisdoms that strongly uphold more interconnected ways of seeing our relationships with others should be reconsidered. If believers are assumed to have a right relationship with God, when in fact their relationships with creation are broken, their way of life is unbalanced. Faith needs to be holistic. Sin is not only in terms of a broken relationship with God and other people but also with the rest of creation. Ecological relations are important in the joyful, spiritual promotion of life for all. If the earth is distressed and the gap is widening between the poor and the rich, God's mission in the world is hampered or undermined.

In the face of climate changes, many are left feeling helpless, paralyzed, with little hope of changing much. Many feel these are signs of the “end times” that seem to be prophesied in many passages of Scripture, and for which they can only wait. Yet it is crucial for us to realize that we must act with God to restore or bring right balance into our common home and do so now! We do so in light of God's grace rather than out of fear.

On this divine turf called earth, we act jointly with others, in faithfulness to God's steadfast love as revealed in Jesus Christ: “For in him all things in heaven and on earth were created....For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or on heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross” (Col 1: 16a, 19-20).

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