
Feeling the *Kairos* Moment: A Response to Barbara Rossing's 2024 World Mission Institute Lecture

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In my response, I want to highlight and respond to two aspects of Dr. Rossing's lecture that stood out to me and helped me to wrestle with what it means to treat this moment as a *kairos* moment. I appreciate this assistance, as I certainly have a tendency to take a pessimistic perspective when it comes to humanity's impact on creation. Frankly, I regularly wonder if it wouldn't be best for us to just get out of the way, collectively passing on as so many other creatures have. And—as I'll get to in a moment—there is something to that sense that we need to get out of the way. Nonetheless, Dr. Rossing has helped me to curb my pessimism a bit and commit to more constructive theological and ethical reflection.

Two things stood out to me in Dr. Rossing's lecture. First, my attention was captured by the importance of affect in her remarks. "Affect," as I am using it, is a term that describes the space in which emotion, belief, and political action influence one another in ways we don't always perceive.¹ She spoke of despair at it being "too late" to do anything about climate change, alluded to the fear we may experience when confronted by apocalyptic realities, and gestured toward our capacity to experience deep affection and appreciation for nonhuman creatures such as rivers and lakes.² Those feelings, along with others, each promote and constrain certain types of action and belief. Feelings, in short, matter a great deal more than our academic training might lead us to acknowledge, and I appreciate Dr. Rossing's attention to them.

Second, the centrality of the concept of *kairos* in Dr. Rossing's talk stresses the importance of recognizing that there is an understanding of this moment that exceeds our own. That is, the meaning of the time we are in—or of any time—is not necessarily what most people take it to be or the interpretation that is most

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prominent culturally. Where Empire incoherently presents this time as a moment of both unstoppable collapse and unnecessary panic, that fuller, apocalyptic understanding perceives this as a moment of *kairos*. This time calls neither for desperation nor opportunism, but rather attention and decisive action.

In the interest of engaging in the work of saying, "Yes, it is Late, but it is not Too Late," I propose three conceptual shifts that could help Christians respond to this *kairos* moment: a shift from a human-centered narrative to a planet-centered narrative, a shift from guilt to grace, and a shift from human dominance to human dependence.

First, the shift from a human-centered narrative to a planet-centered narrative. Too often, we place humans at the center of our climate change story. We frame ourselves as responsible for the rest of creation, capable of destroying the planet, and in danger of letting this *kairos* moment slip by. I suggest that we instead center the planet. Far from letting this moment slip by, the planet is already changing, as life adapts in whatever ways it can. Such change is indeed frustrated to the extent that humanity is captured by Empire, but it is already underway. This is absolutely human-created climate change, but to understand the fuller meaning of this moment, we need to contextualize human action within the broader creation of which it has only ever been one aspect. And in working to make the most of this *kairos* moment, we are *participating* in a larger movement of creation, a movement of the Spirit, the healing work of the entire planet.

1. For those interested in learning more about "affect" as I discuss it here, my most significant influence in thinking and writing about affect is the work of Sara Ahmed. I recommend *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2010) and *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2017) as good entry points.

2. Human affective connection to nonhuman—and ostensibly nonliving—creatures is powerfully addressed from an anthropological angle in Elizabeth A. Povinelli's *Geontologies* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2016) and with a biblical studies approach in Mari Joerstad's *The Hebrew Bible and Environmental Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

Second, the shift from guilt to grace. Assertions that it is “too late” are regularly tangled up with a second claim: that it is all our fault. As Dr. Rossing pointed out, climate change and its devastating effects are not everyone’s fault equally. Nonetheless, even among those of us who should claim a fair degree of responsibility, *feeling* guilty about our role in climate change often simply deepens that sense that it is “too late” and that we, of all creatures, have no capacity to do anything to help. Intervening in this debilitating feedback loop, churches can witness to the reality of grace, offering an invitation to repent, let go of that which is destroying us, and embrace the possibility of living otherwise, responding to God’s grace by finding new ways and reclaiming old ways as needed.

Third, the shift from human dominance to human dependence.³ Empire offers us a seductive portrait of creation in which humanity stands on top, capable of determining the fate of creatures great and small. To the extent that climate change is acknowledged and a call to action is heeded, Empire would have us ground that action in the confidence that there is no challenge human brilliance cannot overcome, no system we cannot unravel and bend to our will. Humans are, of course, entirely dependent on all those creatures Empire so easily deems inferior. Lakes and mud, worms and kelp, grass and gut bacteria: we are dependent on all of them for our continued survival.

Following the kenotic—that is, self-emptying—movement of Christ from the mode of divinity we most readily mistake for dominance to a mode of divinity as absolute, unrestrained, infant dependence,⁴ I suggest that we might reject that Great Imperial Chain of Being and allow ourselves to be diminished—or, rather, to allow our self-perception to settle down to the humble level of our animal bodies that God called good.

It is late, but not too late to respond to God’s grace with repentance, reclaiming the place of dependence for which we have been blessedly made, and participating in the planet’s work of healing.

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3. In suggesting this shift to human dependence, I am in conversation with Ivonne Gebara’s *Longing for Running Water* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999) and Sallie McFague’s *The Body of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

4. Sallie McFague offers a powerful account of a kenotic response to climate change in *Blessed Are the Consumers* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013).