
Kairos for Creation, *Kairos* for Mission: Hope for our Common Home

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***Kairos* and climate hope**

In February 2024 the City of Chicago announced a lawsuit against six fossil fuel companies. The Lawsuit targeted Chevron, ConocoPhillips, BP, Exxon Mobil, Phillips 66 and Shell, and the American Petroleum Institute, alleging that the corporations intentionally misled the public, despite longstanding knowledge of the climate dangers of burning oil and gas. Chicago Mayor Brandon Johnson described climate disasters that led the city to sue: “From the unprecedented poor air quality that we experienced last summer to the basement floodings that our residents on the West Side experienced, the consequences of this crisis are severe, as are the costs of surviving them. That is why we are seeking to hold these Defendants accountable.”¹ Chicago’s lawsuit joins those of other cities and local governments, accusing fossil fuel companies and the American Petroleum Institute of a deliberate campaign of deception.²

Exposing a campaign of deception is one link I will make to the biblical book of Revelation. Revelation unmasks the Roman Empire’s deception by pulling back a curtain to reveal the true nature of its predatory system. Revelation portrays the empire system as a snake, a monstrous dragon, “deceiver of the whole world” (Rev 12:9)—similar to the way the people at Standing Rock, North Dakota, in 2016 personified the Dakota Access Oil Pipeline as a dangerous snake, to warn of the pipeline’s danger to their drinking water.

Storytelling—namely, how we communicate the climate story with hope—is another link I will draw to the Book of Revelation. Reading the story of Revelation with Indigenous insights can help us. Earth itself is alive in Revelation, opening its mouth to save God’s people from the dragon’s deadly flood (Rev 12:16).

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In 1985 South African church leaders issued the *Kairos Document* as a daring prophetic statement against apartheid. They invoked the Bible to critique the South African government’s misuse of the Bible. Apartheid “State Theology” was using the apostle Paul’s letter to the Romans (Rom 13:1-7) to claim that the state had been instituted by God.³

To counter this false State Theology, the South African *Kairos Document* pointed to chapter 13 of the Book of Revelation. The document named the apartheid system and the government as a dangerous “dragon” and a “beast.” When the State “becomes the servant of the dragon (the devil) and takes on the appearance of a horrible beast, [i]ts days are numbered because God will not permit his unfaithful servant to reign forever.” With that prophetic pronouncement the 1985 *Kairos Document* made a daring political critique that also was eschatological: Just as John of Patmos identified the Roman Empire of his time as a satanic beast, whose duration was “short,” so too the apartheid system’s days were “numbered.”

In the years since 1985, the South African *Kairos Document* has continued to shape biblical hermeneutics of liberation. The

1. Zack Budryk, “Chicago Sues Oil Companies for Impacts of Climate Change,” *The Hill*, February 21, 2024, <https://thehill.com/policy/energy-environment/4480345-chicago-sues-oil-companies-for-impacts-of-climate-change/>

2. Nearly forty climate lawsuits filed by states and cities are making their way through the courts. The U.S. Supreme Court recently denied appeals from fossil fuel companies seeking to have the Honolulu case dismissed. See Zack Budryk, “Supreme Court allows Honolulu lawsuit against oil companies to proceed,” *The Hill*, January 13, 2025, <https://thehill.com/policy/energy-environment/5082384-supreme-court-honolulu-oil-companies-climate-change-lawsuit/>

3. The *Kairos Document*: Challenge to the Church. A Theological Comment on the Political Crisis in South Africa, chapter 2.1. <https://www.sahistory.org.za/archive/challenge-church-theological-comment-political-crisis-south-africa-kairos-document-1985>

term *kairos* is now evoked in other contexts around the world, where people cry out for justice—whether by Palestinian Christians living under Israeli military occupation, or Canadians working to oppose tar sand oil extraction, in the organization “*KAIROS* Canada.”⁴ The South African document with its notion of *kairos* has helped to give the world much-needed vocabulary.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America named the climate crisis a “*kairos* moment” in a new social message, adopted in 2023: “From a standpoint of faith, it is reasonable to conclude that the climate crisis is, indeed, a *kairos* moment.”⁵ The Greek Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew has been using the term *kairos* for the urgency of the climate crisis since 2007. At the conclusion of an Arctic symposium journey to Greenland, in 2007, Patriarch Bartholomew named the moment as a “*kairos*, a decisive time in our relationship with God’s creation.” He warned that the time is short for the world to take decisive action on climate change:

“As individuals we are often conscious of a *kairos*, a moment when we make a choice that will affect our whole lives. For the human race as a whole, there is now a *kairos*, a decisive time in our relationship with God’s creation. We will either act in time to protect life on earth from the worst consequences of human folly, or we will fail to act.”

Patriarch Bartholomew ended with a prayer: “May God grant us the wisdom to act in time.”⁶

What time is it? The Anthropocene in geologic time

When I was a geology student at Carleton College in the 1970s, we learned mnemonics to memorize the sequence of the geological eras and epochs that could be seen in the rock record, laid down during Earth’s amazing 4.5-billion-year history. For the Paleozoic Era—encompassing the geologic periods of the Cambrian, Ordovician, Silurian, Devonian, Mississippian, Pennsylvanian, Permian—we memorized “Come Over Some Day Maybe Play Poker.”

The Mississippian and Pennsylvanian make up the “Carboniferous” period (meaning “carbon-bearing”), the carbon-intensive time when vast fossil fuel layers—coal, oil shale, and gas—were laid down, from the anaerobic decay of lush ancient forests and marine plants, over the course of some 60 million years. I love studying this geologic and atmospheric history, with our Zygon Center, with Gayle Woloschak and the Epic of Creation class. The evolution of Earth’s atmosphere is an amazing story. Earth’s atmosphere, so toxic in times past, is now perfectly calibrated

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for life. Astronauts who see the thin blue line of our atmosphere marvel at its beauty.⁷

In terms of the biblical story of God’s creation, we might say that God was safely sequestering carbon underground during the Carboniferous Period, from 358 million years ago until 298 million years ago. Green plants, as co-creators with God, were taking carbon out of the atmosphere through photosynthesis and depositing that carbon in rock layers, during those 60 million years. With so much carbon being taken out of the atmosphere and stored underground, Earth was developing a safe temperature for life. This was far different from the planet Venus, Earth’s nearest neighbor, roughly our twin in terms of size, which has an equal amount of carbon. But Venus is too hot for life—because Venus’s carbon is mostly in its atmosphere, the result of runaway global warming millions of years ago (what climate scientist James Hansen calls the “Venus Syndrome”⁸).

The end of the Carboniferous was marked by the Permian extinction. After that came the Mesozoic (the era of the dinosaurs) and Cenozoic (the era of mammals, including our present time). Our geologic mnemonic for memorizing those eras was “Three Jacks Cover Two Queens” for “Triassic, Jurassic, Cretaceous, Tertiary, and Quaternary.” Within the Quaternary period our present epoch was known as the Holocene—an amazing period of climate stability, which started about 12,000 years ago after the end of the last Ice Age, the Pleistocene epoch.

That was what I learned in college in the 1970s, before we knew about climate change.⁹ But now scientists tell us that the

4. Kairos Palestine, <https://www.kairospalestine.ps/>, Kairos Canada, <https://www.kairoscanada.org/>

5. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America social message, “Earth’s Climate Crisis,” adopted 2023. A four-session ELCA Study Guide is titled “Our Kairos Moment.” <https://www.elca.org/faith/faith-and-society/social-messages/climate>

6. His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, Symposium on the Arctic, 7-12 September 2007, Greenland: “The Mirror of Life: Part 3, Symposium Closing Address,” at <http://orth-transfiguration.org/library/orthodoxy/mirros>.

7. Sally Ride and Tam O’Shaughnessy, *Mission Planet Earth: Our World and its Climate—And How Humans are Changing Them* (New York: Roaring Brook Press, 2009).

8. James Hansen, “Making Things Clearer: Exaggeration, Jumping the Gun, and the Venus Syndrome,” https://www.columbia.edu/~jeh1/mailings/2013/20130415_Exaggerations.pdf.

9. Fossil fuel companies have known about the dangers of fossil fuels for climate warming since the 1950s, but they deliberately buried the information and conducted campaigns of denial. See Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke*

world has exited the Holocene and entered an entirely new geologic epoch—post-Holocene—that some scientists say can only be called the Anthropocene.¹⁰ That name signals that the greatest impact now on the planet's life is caused by *anthropoi*, humans, with our carbon-emitting industrial production, and our nuclear weapons seen in the stratigraphic record. Some suggest calling our epoch the Plasticene, for plastic.¹¹ Or the Capitalocene, for extractive capitalism—that's the suggestion of theologian Jorg Rieger who points out that 100 corporations have been responsible for 71% of carbon emissions.¹²

This new epoch is sobering.

Our world is ill with a fever, as Pope Francis lamented in his 2024 message "For the Cry of the Earth."¹³ Journalist Dahr Jamail, author of the book *The End of Ice*, names the causes: "Earth has a severe fever, and the global, industrial society built on growth, extraction, and colonialism is the cause."¹⁴ Like Peter's mother-in-law suffering from fever in the gospel of Mark (Mark 1:31); like the little daughter who is at the "point of death," whose father says to Jesus, "my little daughter is at the eschatos" (Mark 5:23); our moment is truly about eschatology.¹⁵ We must transform our economy rapidly toward a clean energy future, so we avert irreversible tipping points—tipping points that would jeopardize biodiversity, ocean systems, permafrost, coral reefs, aquifers, ice sheets, forests, food systems, and all of life.

***Kairos* urgency: Why climate matters for global mission**

The climate emergency matters for the World Mission Institute because climate instability is causing suffering and death. The Syrian civil war may have been the first climate-caused war. "Water shortages in the Fertile Crescent in Syria, Iraq, and Turkey killed livestock, drove up food prices, sickened children, and forced

to *Global Warming*, (Bloomsbury, 2020). The greenhouse effect had been discovered and published in 1857 by Eunice Foote. See Tyler Santora, "The Female Scientist Who Discovered the Basics of Climate Science—And Was Forgotten by History," *Audubon Magazine*, July 17, 2019.

10. <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2024/mar/22/geologists-reject-declaration-of-anthropocene-epoch>

11. Nelson Rangel-Buitrago, William Neal, Allan Williams, "The Plasticene: Time and Rocks" in *Marine Pollution Bulletin* 185, December 2022. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpolbul.2022.114358>

12. Joerg Rieger, *Theology in the Capitalocene: Ecology, Identity, Class and Solidarity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2022); see Rieger's blog, "Climate Change, Christianity, and the Capitalocene" <https://www.joergrieger.com/blog-home/climate-change-christianity-and-the-capitalocene>.

13. Vatican News: <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2024-08/pope-s-september-prayer-intention-for-the-cry-of-the-earth.html>

14. Dahr Jamail, <https://www.resilience.org/stories/2023-12-19/holding-the-fire-episode-12-dilafruz-khonikboyeva/>

15. See Barbara Rossing, "Reimagining Eschatology: Toward Healing and Hope for a World at the Eschatos," in Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Hilda Koster, eds., *Planetary Solidarity: Global Women's voices on Christian Doctrine and Climate Justice* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017) 325-347.

The cruelest global injustice of the climate crisis is that consequences of climate change fall most heavily on vulnerable people, on people who did the least to cause it: on island nations, Indigenous communities, subsistence farmers in Africa, Asia and Latin America whose crops are devastated by drought; on women and girls who have to walk further and further to find water; on migrants. Future generations will suffer most of all.

1.5 million rural residents to the outskirts of Syria's jam-packed cities—just as that country was exploding with immigrants from the Iraq war."¹⁶

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In health terms, climate change is the largest global public health crisis we have ever faced as a species and as a planet. Vector-borne diseases such as Zika, cholera, malaria, and much worse, afflict people who are the poorest and most vulnerable. If we care about God's mission in the world, we must care about the climate, as the late Pope Francis so eloquently implored in his 2015 encyclical, *Laudato Si*.¹⁷

Good news: It is not too late

The good news is that our best scientists tell us there is still time. We are in a crucial decade now, the 2020s. What we do in this decade matters for the next thousands of years. Joelle Gergis, one of the authors of Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, argues: "You are living through the most profound moment in

16. Craig Welch, "Climate Change Helped Spark Syrian War, Study Says," *National Geographic* March 2, 2015. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/150302-syria-war-climate-change-drought>

17. Pope Francis, *Laudato Si: On Care for Our Common Home*. Encyclical Letter, 2015. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html

human history.¹⁸

Our best scientists—Michael Mann, Katharine Hayhoe, Gergis, and many others—make the case that the world has a very achievable pathway to safety. We need to make a rapid transition to clean energy. Basically, we need to electrify everything and generate that electricity renewably. By the year 2030, they say, in order to keep warming below 1.5 degrees Celsius, we will need to reduce emission of heat-trapping gas from fossil fuel burning by half, and reach net zero by 2050.¹⁹

And they say we can do it!

That's the good news in the book *Not Too Late*. See the chapter by Solutions Project CEO, Gloria Walton, "Shared Solutions are our Greatest Hope and Strength." The Solutions Project gives a roadmap for how every U.S. state can be powered by 100% renewable energy. The path does not even have to be difficult, because renewable energy breakthroughs have happened so much faster, and so much more cheaply, than anyone expected. The cost of solar and wind energy will continue to go down. It truly is an energy revolution! This isn't just wishful thinking. The International Energy Agency calls solar the "cheapest energy in history"—its cost has dropped more than 90% between 2010 and 2020.²⁰ So too for the cost of batteries, and heat pumps, and induction stoves, and more. Fixing climate change is not about sacrifice, argues Rebecca Solnit. It is about innovation; it is about making a transformation; it is about abundance.²¹ Policy-makers tell us we have an ambitious and very achievable pathway to safety.

That means that our moment is a *kairos*. A hopeful, urgent, opportune moment in time.

Kairos can be a very helpful term as an environmental wake-up call. But in calling this moment a *kairos*, we must be careful not to imply that a future time could come when it will be too late to do anything.

We need to say clearly: it is not too late. Nature itself has power to heal our climate, through regenerative agriculture and much more. Even if we temporarily overshoot the recommended temperatures by the year 2050, temperatures can be brought back down, by re-sequestering carbon. The Drawdown Project shows at least 100 ways that re-sequestration can happen.²² The 2023 movie "Common Ground" shows how regenerative agriculture

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can take carbon out of the atmosphere, storing it in the soil. There is still time to fix the worst effects of the climate crisis. The 2002 ecumenical statement by His Holiness Patriarch Bartholomew and Pope John Paul II still holds true: "It is not too late. God's world has incredible healing powers. Within a single generation, we could steer the earth toward our children's future. Let that generation start now, with God's help and blessing."²³

Countering the new/old climate denial

But the propaganda campaigns of fossil fuel companies, funded with millions of dollars, try to convince us that it is now too late to make a difference for the climate. Their deliberate campaigns of deception are named in the Chicago lawsuit—a voice joined by cynics, alarmists, doomers, and even some theologians. Sadly, "too late" is what we seem to hear from Timothy Beal in his book *When Time is Short: Finding Our Way in the Anthropocene*. The only hope we can have now is what Beal calls "palliative hope."²⁴

But as Imran Ahmed, CEO of the Center for Countering Digital Hate, points out, "too late" in effect becomes just another form of climate denial: It leads to inaction. Ahmed names that slogan "too late" as the "New Climate Denial"—a campaign organized by the same fossil fuel corporations who for years tried to deny the reality of climate change. Ahmed analyzed the recent messaging of hundreds of YouTube sites and web sites, and found that they are also funded by fossil fuel companies. "Instead of flat-out denying climate change, oil industry-funded voices now go on YouTube and other digital platforms to spread the false message that action now won't make any difference."²⁵

18. Joelle Gergis, "A Climate Scientist's Take on Hope," in Rebecca Solnit and Thelma Young Lutunatabua, *Not Too Late: Changing the Climate Story from Despair to Possibility* (Chicago: Haymarket Books), 38. See also Katharine Hayhoe, *Saving Us: A Climate Scientist's Case for Hope and Healing in a Divided World* (Simon & Schuster, 2021).

19. Christiana Figueres and Tom Rivett-Carnac, *The Future We Choose: Surviving the Climate Crisis* (Knopf, 2020).

20. Solnit, "Not Too Late" p.9.

21. Rebecca Solnit, "What if Climate Change Meant Not Doom—But Abundance?" *Washington Post*, March 15, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/03/15/rebecca-solnit-climate-change-wealth-abundance/>

22. See the work of Project Drawdown, which focuses on the many ways we can re-sequester carbon from the atmosphere. [Drawdown.org/solutions](https://drawdown.org/solutions)

23. *Common Declaration on Environmental Ethics of John Paul II and the Ecumenical Patriarch His Holiness Bartholomew I.* https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/2002/june/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20020610_venice-declaration.html

24. Timothy Beal, *When Time is Short: Finding Our Way in the Anthropocene* (Beacon Press, 2022), 15, "It may not be too late, but it probably is."

25. "The New Climate Denial," interview with Imran Ahmed on Living on Earth radio show hosted by Steve Curwood, January 26, 2024: <https://loe.org/shows/shows.html?programID=24-P13-00004#feature3>; see also Reuters, "YouTube Making money off new breed of climate denial, monitoring group says," January 16, 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/climate-energy/youtube->

Sadly, that “too late” messaging may be succeeding with too many people. An Associated Press poll from April 2023 found that a majority of Americans (8 in 10) say they personally have experienced extreme weather caused by climate change. But few feel motivated. They feel anxiety and sadness, but they rarely talk about the issue, and don’t feel there is much individuals can do.²⁶

Similarly, climate scientist Katherine Hayhoe’s survey data shows that the vast majority of Americans are not climate deniers. Most people are “worried” about climate change and believe it’s real. But only 8% are what Hayhoe calls “activated”—that is, only 8% of people think their actions to fix climate change will make any meaningful difference.²⁷

“Spiral of silence” is how the environmental editor at *The Guardian* describes the fact that 89% of the world’s people want more to be done to address climate change, yet they mistakenly assume their peers do not. To counter that false perception, “*The Guardian* is joining forces with dozens of newsrooms around the world to launch the 89% project—and highlight the fact that the vast majority of the world’s population wants climate action.”²⁸

So: the church’s mission at this moment is to say: We are in a *kairos* moment, and *kairos* means an opportune moment. It is not too late. Our task, the church’s mission, is to open up the space between denial and despair, as a space for bold, prophetic action. As a space for hope. For transforming our economy rapidly, like in the biblical story of Jonah. In Jonah, the people of Nineveh pivoted their whole system in just forty days, starting with grassroots action! We already have all the technology and resources to make that pivot really fast enough; what we lack now is the political will, the political imagination.

To quote the subtitle of Solnit’s and Lutunatabua’s book *Not Too Late*, we need to change the climate story from despair to possibility. The biblical word *kairos* means that opportune moment to change the story, to replace despair with hope and possibility.

Jesus proclaimed a *kairos* as a word of hope for turning. So must we.

Biblical storytelling: Reading the signs of the times (*Kairos*)

Jesus’ first words in the Gospel of Mark proclaim *kairos*: Mark 1:15, “The *kairos* is fulfilled.” Or we might translate as Joanna Dewey does, “The time is up. The empire of God has arrived!”²⁹

[making-money-off-new-breed-climate-denial-monitoring-group-says-2024-01-16/](https://www.counterhate.com/making-money-off-new-breed-climate-denial-monitoring-group-says-2024-01-16/). Ahmet’s work can be found at www.counterhate.com.

26. Hannah Fingerhut, AP, “Most blame climate change for extreme weather,” *The Seattle Times*, April 23, 2023.

27. Katharine Hayhoe: Dickinson College Rose-Walters Prize lecture, December 24, 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=scvExRjZXYs>

28. Damian Carriangton, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/apr/22/spiral-of-silence-climate-action-very-popular-why-dont-people-realise>

29. Joanna Dewey, “The Gospel of Mark as an Oral/Aural Narrative: Implications for Preaching” *Currents in Theology and Mission*

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In Luke’s Gospel Jesus used the word *kairos* to encourage people to “read the signs of the times (*kairoi*, Luke 12:56).” This task was expressed by the Vatican in 1965, as Anne Elvey points out in her chapter on *Kairos* and Climate: “The Vatican II *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* refers to the ‘signs of the time’: ‘At all times the Church carries the responsibility of reading the signs of the time and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel’ (*Gaudium et Spes* 4).”³⁰

The apostle Paul uses the word *kairos* in Romans 8: “I consider the sufferings of this present *kairos* are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed.” And Paul uses the same word later in chapter 13: “Besides this you know what time it is [what *kairos* it is], how it is now the moment to wake from sleep.”

The Book of Revelation uses this term *kairos* four times and declares that the beastly empire system “knows its time is short,” (Rev 13: that was in the 1985 South African *Kairos* statement). Most importantly, in chapter 11 the author of the Book of Revelation announces that the time—*kairos*—has come to “destroy the destroyers of earth” (Rev 11:18). Note that John does not say the time has come to destroy the *earth*, but rather to destroy the *destroyers*: namely to destroy the unjust Empire system that was destroying people and the Earth, a system that must come to an end.

Jesus and his followers boldly positioned their counter-story, declaring God’s reign as a *kairos*, over and against the Roman imperial story. They dethroned Rome’s claims of “Roma Aeterna” (eternal Rome), proclaimed in Rome’s public monuments, inscriptions, coins, and propaganda for the public to see. In Revelation, John of Patmos re-told the Exodus story in his own time, scripting Rome as Egypt, and Jesus the Lamb as a new Moses. He called on people to undertake an exodus out of that unjust imperial system that was coming to an end,

A “revolution of the imagination” is how John Collins de-

44 (2017).

30. Anne Elvey, “Interpreting the Time: Climate Change and the Climate in/of the Gospel of Luke” in Anne Elvey and David Gormley O’Brien, eds, *Climate Change-Cultural Change: Religious Responses and Responsibilities* (Mosaic Press, 2013) 59.

scribes the apocalyptic worldview.³¹ Revelation empowers radical witness and ethics by giving us a sacramental imagination, taking us on a journey into the heart of God's vision for our world. Like the little dog Toto in "The Wizard of Oz," Revelation pulls back a curtain to expose the true nature of reality—both the pathologies of empire, experienced as plagues against creation, and also the beauty of creation.³² Revelation shows us the throne of God, the Alpha and Omega. Then it takes us back to our lives with our vision transformed, to join with victims of injustice who cry out, "How long O Lord?" (Rev 6:10), and to live according to an alternative community vision.

Biblical apocalypses are not escapist, contrary to what some older scholarship thought. They look for the renewal of Earth.³³ Recent scholarship has convincingly shown that biblical eschatological hope "does not leave the world behind." Early Jewish apocalypses such as Daniel and 1 Enoch functioned as resistance literature, engaging historical crises of oppressive empires, portraying empires' brutality as so severe that the very ordering of the world is "de-created."³⁴

Revelation and other apocalypses communicate their prophetic message not by logical proofs or arguments but by means of visionary journeys and pictures, creating what Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza calls an alternative "world of vision."³⁵ They narrate a story to rebuild people's imaginations and mythic consciousness, as Chilean scholar Pablo Richard underscores.³⁶ They show us a vision for resistance, healing, and hope.

Revelation reveals a living planet, full of beauty

Revelation is a book of joy and vibrant life, that can give us "hope for a radical reformation of life on earth," as Catherine Keller describes.³⁷ The cosmology of Revelation and other apocalypses

Indigenous knowledge helps us understand the apocalyptic understanding of animals and nature having agency and spirits—personhood, if you will.

assumes a strong solidarity between humans and the natural world, and between visible and invisible powers and spirits. Animals are described as having "souls" (*psychē*, Rev 16:3, similar to 8:9), hearkening back to Genesis 1, the *nephesh hayyah*.³⁸ The whole cosmos sings praise to God in the throne room scene of chapters 4-5, drawing from Isaiah and Ezekiel. The four living creatures represent all of nature, the creation, as they sing "Holy, holy, holy"! Animals talk in Revelation; animals sing. (like the movie "Babe"). "Living water" in Rev 7:17 articulates the idea that Water is itself alive and crying out, with its own living spirit.

Indigenous knowledge helps us understand the apocalyptic understanding of animals and nature having agency and spirits—personhood, if you will.

Here I turn to my late colleague Gordon Straw, a member of the Brotherhood Nation, whose inaugural lecture in the Cornelson Chair of Spiritual Formation at LSTC in 2017 wove together several strands of spirituality, including the metaphysics of a personal universe: encouraging us toward "Seeing the universe as living and personal, rather than a mechanical and objective universe."³⁹

Gordon Straw quoted Vine DeLoria's description of Indigenous metaphysics, "The best description...was the realization that the world, and all its possible experiences, constituted a social reality, a fabric of life in which everything had the possibility of intimate knowing relationships because, ultimately, everything was related."⁴⁰

Revelation's metaphysics is very similar to what Straw and DeLoria describe. In Revelation an ecosystem—water—is represented by an angelic messenger or guardian—its spirit. Other elements of nature also have angelic figures as guardians, including the angels who control the four winds in Rev 7:1-2, and the angel with authority over fire in 14:18.⁴¹ Walter Wink noted this

31. John Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature* (Eerdmans, 2016), 283.

32. For the Toto analogy, see Barbara Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation* (Basic Books, 2004), 87-88.

33. Richard Horsley, *Revolt of the Scribes: Resistance and Apocalyptic Origins* (Fortress Press, 2009). See also Micah Kiel, *Apocalyptic Ecology: The Book of Revelation, the Earth, and the Future* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2017). For a critique of the entire construct of "apocalypticism" re-visiting the legacy of Albert Schweitzer and others, see Horsley, *The Prophet Jesus and the Renewal of Israel: Moving Beyond a Diversivary Debate* (Eerdmans, 2012).

34. Anthea Portier-Young, *Apocalypse Against Empire: Theologies of Resistance in Early Judaism* (Eerdmans, 2011), xxiii.

35. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World* (Proclamation Commentary; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 13, 22.

36. Pablo Richard, *Apocalypse: A People's Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995).

37. Catherine Keller, "Eschatology, Ecology, and a Green Ecumenacy," in Rebecca Chopp and Mar Lewis Taylor, eds., *Reconstructing Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 338. See also Keller, *Facing Apocalypse: Climate, Democracy, and Other Last Chances* (Orbis, 2021).

38. Peter Perry, "Things Having Lives: Ecology, Allusion and Performance in Revelation" in *Currents in Theology and Mission* 37 (2010): 105-113.

39. Gordon Straw, "Native Thought, Suffering, and Spiritual Formation as Theological Education," in *Currents in Theology and Mission* 47 (2020) 10. Gordon often referenced Steven Charleston. See Steven Charleston, *We Survived the End of the World: Lessons from Native America on Apocalypse and Hope* (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2023).

40. Straw, "Native Thought, Suffering, and Spiritual Formation as Theological Education," in *Currents in Theology and Mission* 47 (2020), 10-11.

41. "Guardian" is the terminology of David Aune, *Revelation* (Word Biblical Commentary 52b; Nashville: Thomas Nelson), 884.

in his 1986 trilogy on the powers, *Unmasking the Powers*. Western Christianity has sometimes overlooked this biblical apocalyptic cosmology of spirit and angelic representation of nature. These sources “have languished, unused, in the very heart of our own tradition, in the angels of nature.”⁴²

Wink pointed out that evil and oppressive systems also have a corporate spirit. In Revelation evil systems are diagnosed as multi-headed beasts. “‘Satan’ is the world-encompassing spirit of the Domination System,” Wink wrote.⁴³

Revelation’s mythological imagery of dragons, mutant animals, and more, and this language of powers, spirits, and the demonic can help us in analyzing structural evil and the deceptions of fossil fuel companies and climate deniers today.

What’s important is that Revelation assures us that deceptive, evil powers have already been defeated. The war in heaven in chapter 12, a deeply mythic chapter, calls Evil all kinds of names: the great dragon, that ancient serpent, the Satan, “the deceiver of the whole imperial world” (Rev 12:9). The deceiver has been thrown down! He has been defeated—by people, by us! The community of those who follow Jesus are named as those who conquer the beast, “they [we] have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony” (Rev 12:10).

What Revelation is saying to us, in this *kairos* moment for the climate, is that our testimony really matters! Pablo Richard says, drawing on his experience during the Pinochet military dictatorship in Chile in the 1970s, “Testimony is not just any word, but a public word.” “In Revelation, testimony always has a power to change history.”⁴⁴ That word “testimony” is the same Greek word as “witness,” as Brian Blount shows in his wonderful book on Revelation, *Can I Get A Witness?* Blount describes Revelation as “calling for a witness of active, nonviolent resistance to Rome’s claim of lordship over human history.”⁴⁵

So that’s what we are called to do now, drawing on Blount: we must give our witness of active nonviolent resistance to fossil fuels’ claims of lordship over human history, before it’s too late.

Lawsuit: Legal personhood, and a legal voice for waters

My final point is to extend Revelation’s notion of creation’s personhood to include a legal personhood—a legal voice for the waters.⁴⁶ In Revelation, “testimony” or “witness” (*martyria*) is a legal term, used in a courtroom. I want to suggest that Revelation can take us one step further in our active nonviolent resistance to fossil fuels today, namely giving nature legal personhood in a courtroom.

42. Walter Wink, *Unmasking the Powers: The Invisible Forces that Determine Human Existence* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 164.

43. Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 26.

44. Richard, *Apocalypse*, 33.

45. Brian Blount, *Can I Get a Witness? Reading Revelation Through African American Culture* (Westminster John Knox, 2005), 40.

46. For detailed discussion, see Barbara Rossing, “Waters Cry Out: Water Protectors, Watershed Justice, and the Voice of Waters in Revelation,” in *Currents in Theology and Mission* 47 (2020), 38–42.

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The idea of legal personhood for rivers and bodies of water takes up a precedent set by Aotearoa New Zealand’s Whanganui River Claims Settlement, granting legal personhood to the Te Awa Tapua River, recognized by New Zealand’s Maori people and the parliamentary government. Indigenous communities in Ecuador and Australia have likewise successfully advocated for protecting watersheds by recognizing them as juridical persons. In December 2018, the White Earth Band of Ojibwe in Minnesota passed a tribal law establishing legal personhood for their wild rice growing in lakes. That law begins by stating: “*Manoomin, or wild rice, within all the Chippewa ceded territories, possesses inherent rights to exist, flourish, regenerate, and evolve, as well as inherent rights to restoration, recovery and preservation.*”

In 2019, voters in the U.S. city of Toledo, Ohio, granted legal personhood to Lake Erie. They did this because in 2014, for a week, the city’s half million residents could not drink the water from Lake Erie, one of the Great Lakes, the source of drinking water for some eleven million people.⁴⁷ A toxic algal bloom caused by agricultural run-off and other sources poisoned the city’s drinking water supply. Seeking to codify legally enforceable rights for the natural world, the Lake Erie Bill of Rights (LEBOR) passed with 61.4 percent of the vote in Toledo.

It was shot down in the courts, of course.

In enacting this legislation, Toledo voters joined other municipalities and communities worldwide who similarly grant rights to bodies of water as part of the “Rights of Nature” movement, dating to 1972.⁴⁸ Legal standing to sue on behalf of Lake Erie would be comparable to the legal standing of corporations as legal persons—as U.S. Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas argued unsuccessfully in 1972, in a dissenting minority opinion. Justice Douglas thought a river should be able to be a plaintiff

47. Dan Egan, *The Death and Life of the Great Lakes*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 2017), 232.

48. Christopher D. Stone, “Should Trees Have Standing?—Toward Legal Rights for Natural Objects,” in *Southern California Law Review* 450 (1972).

in a lawsuit, in the same way as a corporation can be a plaintiff.

The ordinary corporation is a ‘person’ for purposes of the adjudicatory processes... The river, for example, is the living symbol of all the life it sustains or nourishes — fish, aquatic insects, water ouzels, otter, fisher, deer, elk, bear, and all other animals, including man, who are dependent on it or who enjoy it for its sight, its sound, or its life. The river as plaintiff speaks for the ecological unit of life that is part of it. Those people who have a meaningful relation to that body of water — whether it be a fisherman, a canoeist, a zoologist, or a logger — must be able to speak for the values which the river represents and which are threatened with destruction.⁴⁹

Fifty years ago, Douglas did not succeed. United States law courts have recognized corporations as persons with legal standing for more than 100 years, but watersheds, aquifers, and wild rice are not legal persons—at least, not yet.

But Revelation would disagree. In Revelation and other biblical apocalypses, waters have a voice, including a legal voice as plaintiff, or prosecutorial witness, bringing a lawsuit to God against their oppressors. I see this in chapter 16 of Revelation, the destructive sequence of bowl plagues (modeled on the Exodus plagues), when the third bowl is poured out (Rev 16:4–7), and when rivers and waters are turned to blood. The angel or messenger of Water interprets this through the logic of justice and legal consequences, as the boomerang-like effect of oppressors’ own crimes coming back around on them: “You are just in these judgments, O Holy One, for they have shed the blood of saints and prophets, and you have given them blood to drink. It is axiomatic” (Rev 16:5, my translation).

What’s important is that the waters have legal representation by a guardian angel or messenger (*angelos*, Rev 16:5) who can pursue justice. They cry out in resistance when they are being polluted, and God hears their lawsuit.

Strikingly, a personified talking altar then speaks to affirm the just judgments of God’s law court: “Yes, O Lord God, the Almighty, your judgments are true and just” (Rev 16:7). And then comes a liturgy, representing the community. As Pablo Richard explains, liturgy “breaks in at this point so that the community may be actively present... Far from being a spectator to the exodus that God is bringing about from the Roman Empire, the community is actively involved, as expressed symbolically in the liturgy.”⁵⁰

***Kairos* now: Tell an alternative story**

“The universe is made up of stories,” says the poet Muriel Rukeyser. Stories hold immense power. Stories shape how we see the world. We need to tell the stories of how the transformation to a clean

Stories hold immense power. Stories shape how we see the world. We need to tell the stories of how the transformation to a clean energy future is happening now.

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We can tell Bible stories. We can tell the story of the defeat of apartheid. We can tell so many stories of struggles for justice and civil rights, where people have won victories for justice.

We can tell the story of how in 2023 law school students in the tiny island nation of Vanuatu won a victory for climate justice.⁵¹ They succeeded in getting the UN International Court of Justice in March 2023 to issue an advisory ruling, taking countries to task that don’t meet emissions commitments. This moral and legal victory happened thanks to Indigenous attorney Julian Agwan.

There are so many other stories.

Just this past year: the Montana state lawsuit, who thought those kids would win? But because the Montana constitution gives a legal right to clean water and air, a Montana court ruled that the state had violated the youths’ constitutional rights through its promotion of fossil fuels; a victory that gives hope for a federal lawsuit filed Our Children’s Trust, *Juliana versus the United States*.

We can tell stories of Indigenous law claims, such as the Boldt Decision fifty years ago that enforced treaty fishing rights for Indigenous tribes in the state of Washington. We can tell the stories of how the church stood on the side of marginalized people and won!

Here’s a funny story: Bill McKibben’s climate organization for senior citizens, Third Act, staged protests at Costco, seeking to persuade Costco to “clean up your credit card” by dropping Citibank as its credit card issuer. Citibank is one of the worst banks funding fossil fuel projects. Petitions from 18,000 Costco credit card holders were delivered to the new CEO, along with a cake.⁵² I love seeing the picture of senior citizens with party hats and balloons, dancing in the Costco cake aisle.

Be funny! Do street theatre! Use prophetic imagination. The Occupy Wall Street movement made a giant Golden Calf, like the golden calf in the Exodus story, to help people see the idolatry of economic injustice.

We need stories to help galvanize people for hope. “A lot of stories in circulation endeavor to strip you of hope and power, to tell you it doesn’t matter or it’s too late,” warns Rebecca Solnit.⁵³ But stories are one of our super-powers.

51. *Washington Post*, “How a Small Island Nation Got the World’s Highest Court to Take on Climate Justice” <https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-solutions/2023/03/29/vanuatu-international-court-un/>

52. <https://thirdact.org/sacramento/2024/03/05/third-act-moves-costco-to-discuss-carbon-with-citi/>

53. Solnit, *Not Too Late* 4.

49. Cited by Clint Williams, “Should nature have a legal standing: A legal Decision about a River in New Zealand raises logistical questions,” *Mother Nature Network* October 5, 2012.

50. Richard, *Apocalypse*, 83.

The church's task is to open up the space between denial and despair. Open up that space for action.

It was high school students in a summer science program at Gustavus Adolphus College who succeeded in getting the ELCA to develop a social message on Earth's Climate Crisis.⁵⁴ The students issued a statement, writing letters to bishops, lobbying voting members at the churchwide assembly. And now we have the ELCA Climate Message that names the climate crisis a *kairos* and calls for serious action, and advocacy.

We can tell so many stories of successes! We must not lose heart. There is still time!

Nature still needs recognition for its legal voice, but we know it has amazing re-generative powers to heal. To cool cities. To filter polluted water. To sequester carbon. As Robin Wall Kimmerer writes, "Even a wounded world is feeding us... Even a wounded world holds us, giving us moments of wonder and joy. I choose joy over despair. Not because I have my head in the sand, but because joy is what the Earth gives me daily and I must return the gift."⁵⁵

We don't need dangerous geoengineering solutions.⁵⁶ We can listen to the land, we can transform forestry, and regenerative agriculture. We can stop subsidizing fossil fuel, and stop supporting fossil fuels with our investments.

Time is short but it is not too late. Campaigns of deceit—what Naomi Oreskes calls "Merchants of Doubt" tells how the fossil fuel companies deceived the public for too many years, narrowing the solutions' pathways now. I'm a skier, a hiker, and I'll be really sad if we lose the glaciers.⁵⁷ But it is not too late to make the transformation.

Conclusion: The New Jerusalem vision and world-healing today

Revelation situates us at a crossroads and gives us a choice between two city visions. It calls us to "come out" of Empire (Rev 18:4) so that we can come into God's vision for our world. Jesus, God's Lamb, leads God's people to "springs of living water" (Rev 7:17, RSV).

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but on a renewed Earth, with a
living river of life flowing through the
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those with no money, and a tree whose
fruit feeds the world and whose leaves
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creation means renewal and healing.

"Come" is the invitation of the antiphonal liturgy of Rev 22:17, which invites all who are thirsty to "come," to drink from God's living water. The New Jerusalem vision offers an economy in which water is a gift without cost, for all who need it. Water is priceless (*dorean*). Water is life, as the water protectors said at Standing Rock.

As George Zachariah noted for the World Council of Churches' "Seven Weeks of Water" for Lent, The New Jerusalem vision's promise of free access to clean and pure water is the Divine rejection of the prevailing political economy of commodification of water."⁵⁸

For *kairos* today, New Jerusalem is the most important vision of the book. God's dwelling is not up in heaven but on a renewed Earth, with a living river of life flowing through the center of the beautiful city, even for those with no money, and a tree whose fruit feeds the world and whose leaves are for healing. Hope for the whole creation means renewal and healing.

That tree of life can heal us and our world. And we pray it will be in time.

54. Professor James B. Martin-Schramm, the principal writer of the ELCA Climate Message, was one of the speakers with me at the Gustavus College event. See Martin-Schramm's *Climate Justice: Ethics, Energy, and Public Policy* (Fortress Press: 2010).

55. Quoted by Solnit in *Not Too Late*, 192.

56. Raymond Pierrehumbert and Michael Mann, "The UK's gamble on solar geoengineering is like using aspirin for cancer," *The Guardian*, March 12, 2025. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/mar/12/solar-geoengineering-uk>

57. On fossil fuel companies' false propaganda and deception campaigns see also Kevin O'Brien, *Meeting the Enemy: The Fossil Fuel Industry and the Power of Christian Climate Resistance* (Fortress Press: 2025).

58. "Pilgrimage towards Water Justice: Foretaste of a Redeemed Earth," Seven Weeks for Water 2014 (Geneva: WCC, Ecumenical Water Network) https://water.oikoumene.org/en/whatwedo/seven-weeks-for-water/past/2014/2014_1_Foretaste_of_a_Redeemed_Earth.pdf