

Hymn of Preparation: Love Divine, All Love Excelling (Hyfrydol Tune)

As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" Then Jesus asked him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

If you have ever been a substitute teacher, you know the struggle. For about \$100 a day, and the eternal gratitude of overworked school leaders, teachers, and parents hoping for a miracle, you too can take charge of a group of teenagers you barely know, have about 3 minutes to build a relationship with, take on all the angst and strife of a year of learning that you have absolutely no context for, and still be expected to follow a plan, with learning outcomes attached, that may well cover only a few minutes of the hours that lie ahead.

I never forgot my first substitute experience, coming into the classroom of a middle school teacher that I had struggled with as a student. The students were about as I would expect...frustrated from disrespect and low expectations, eager to show me exactly how they felt. I became adept at ignoring one student's constant yet harmless mumblings from the back of the room, until he loudly announced "We, the class, regret to inform you there will be a pencil drop in approximately 2 minutes. Prepare to lose control." I looked at him, looked around the room, walked over to the teacher's desk, and without a word knocked a bin of colored pencils to the floor. "Sorry...I'm early" was all I said. With the carefully crafted structure of toxic behavior now thrown down and scattered across the floor, the power struggle was diffused, and we were back on track. Sometimes you have to be disruptive to get to the good stuff.

As a principal, that experience guided me to be very accommodating to substitute teachers. So accommodating that when I found out one of our very few subs, in a high school biology class was giving a Jesus word search, to “brighten the day”, I reminded her there was an assigned evolution video that really needed to be watched, and offered to show the video myself, if she’d like to take a little break in the library. Later in the day, I got a frantic call from our librarian. “You need to come here...you’re not going to believe this”. When I got to the library, I learned that our substitute teacher had made a donation to the library, a book titled “Resisting the Green Dragon: Dominion, not Death”, a publication of the Cornwall Alliance, an evangelical public-policy group opposing the long-accepted doctrine of care for all creation, and instead promoting Stewardship of Creation through the claim that since God granted humans dominion over the Earth, naturally, humans have a right to exploit all natural resources.

It may not be surprising that when Resisting the Green Dragon was published, the Cornwall Alliance had received over 1.3 million dollars in funding from Donors Trust, a funding shell closely linked with the Koch Brothers, ExxonMobil, Chevron and various other energy companies. The book, and corresponding documentary series makes the bold claim that environmentalism is deadly to human prosperity, deadly to human freedom, deadly to human life, and is deadly to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Our teacher’s perspective was that her church believes Jesus is coming, there will be earthquakes in various places, the temple will crumble, and it’s an affront to God to try to stop the process. Essentially, the faster the planet burns, the faster some sort of heavenly life raft materializes, ferrying us to a better place. And friends, she’s not the only one.

A survey conducted by the Pew Research Center just a year before that book was published estimated that 23% of Protestants in the United States believe that Christ will return in their lifetime. We know poll numbers can be rough at best, but that number, if it even remotely resembled an accurate sample, would represent the views of about 39 million people. It might well also represent the views of some in this room, and that's not at all the problem, it's what some have chosen to do in the meantime.

As religious studies professor and author Bart Ehrman points out, *If a significant portion of the voting public believes the end of our civilization is just 40 years off, why worry about the environment? It's no surprise that believers in the Second Coming are significantly more likely to oppose governmental attempts to fight climate change.* This is often supported by quoting the book of Revelation, which warns us of sea creatures dying, water becoming undrinkable, trees burning, and much more. According to Ehrman, this is a misinterpretation.

He tells us that most historical bible scholars agree that until the early 19th century, Revelation was widely thought to be not predictive of the future, but having described events that had already happened, or were happening in their own time in the life of the church. He tells us that the French Revolution changed all that. The Reign of Terror convinced horrified Christians in Britain that the world was coming to a crashing halt in fulfillment of the catastrophes described in Revelation. This futuristic reading of Scripture swept through England and then, with a vengeance, America: The world was going to hell, and it was all according to plan.”

And, here we apparently are again. The effects of very well understood and well-researched carbon dioxide accumulation, a product of our own consumption, are taken as signs of a 1900-year old prediction coming true, in this moment, in our lives. Just as it was predicted in 1524, 1813, 1959, 1988, 2000...and pretty much any other major world crisis.

I have a different take on this. Over the last month in our church, God has been at work through several unaffiliated guest preachers, planting an unintentional yet so necessary recurring theme of loving our neighbor. So...let's go for week 6. Jesus said "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'

Note that Jesus did not say "you should trash your neighbor's backyard and impact their quality of life, in hopes that I show up faster". Still, we are left with today's Gospel reading, in which the greatest building around is forecast to crumble into dust.

Let's consider that temple. Built originally as a modest structure in a time of renewed religious hope, it was greatly expanded under the reign of Herod, a king so consumed by his need for adoration and fear of potential rivals that he imposed burdensome taxes on his people to fund architectural feats of greatness, and expensive gifts made to improve his own self-image. Perhaps, just perhaps, if we are to honor the kingdom of Jesus, built on unconditional love and caring for God's creation, a structure built on a foundation of human self-importance might not be the sturdiest. If we look at it this way, perhaps instead of an eager acceptance of environmental destruction, we find that aligning ourselves with

the Kingdom of Jesus is rekindling our resolve to fight against that same force, reassessing which temples might fall to the ground, in service to, not in defiance of, our Earth.

Temples to human achievement like Bitcoin, a barely 16-year young experiment in currency rooted in a human-created algorithm so complex that the time it takes huge computers to churn through it is assigned a dollar value. In 2022, all of those computers churning together consumed the same amount of energy as Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont and Rhode Island combined, producing carbon emissions which would require the planting of 3.9 billion trees. The carbon emissions of just one year of Bitcoin mining at one plant near Seneca Lake, NY, are equal to an average year of driving for 37,841 Americans. That is one destructive 16 year old.

Or perhaps temples to human greatness, like space tourism, in which one billionaire's 11 hour joyride to the stars emits more carbon dioxide than most people in the world will create in their entire lifetime.

Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down. The call to strive for a more perfect world has unified Christians for centuries. Indeed, may the great structures that block our path fall to the ground, and may we rise up together, following a call to discipleship instead of a call to inaction. May we keep believing that the perfect world lies just around the corner, and above all, May we continue to create it.

Closing Hymn: Blue Boat Home