



What's a Christian to Do About Climate Change?

Script:

Welcome to Session 3 of the Beginner's Guide to Creation Care and Climate Change. This is a project of the volunteers on the Earthcare Team of St. Benedict's Episcopal Church, Los Osos, California.

Session 3's topic is "What's a Christian to Do about Climate Change? – Personal Responsibility"

My name is Don Maruska. I'll be sharing a few comments and illustrations from personal experience.

You'll also be hearing from two other volunteers on the Earthcare Team.

The Reverend Barry Turner glories in the presence of God through all of creation with a special interest in the intersection of science and theology. After retiring as rector of St. Stephen's in San Luis Obispo, California, he now serves as an Associate Priest at St. Benedict's.

John Horsley is a long-time member of St. Benedict's. He earned his Ph.D. in chemistry from Oxford University in England. His career spans decades as a chemist in industry and as a professor. John brings his love of God and understanding of science to our climate efforts.

Let's take a quick look at some perspectives about climate change and how we connect with it personally.

We've seen a dramatic rise in hurricanes that were so numerous 2020 that their names exceeded the letters in the alphabet. Storms are intensifying in some places while in others like southern Africa there is an epic drought putting millions on the edge of starvation. But wherever we are we can see the effects of climate change. For example, we bought our home 25 years to enjoy the shores of Morro Bay. No one predicted then that in this century sea levels would rise three feet.

So, what can a Christian do about climate change? We are highlighting three things in this video. First is to know and love God in all of creation. Then, to understand and share the facts of climate change, especially the impact of our personal choices. We conclude with a focus on how to live a climate-friendly lifestyle.

We invite you to take a few moments and share brief examples with one another of how you like to connect with God's creation.

The following discussion addresses: Why is recognizing climate change so difficult for us? Insights about personal impact. How you can make a difference. We then invite you to share your response and offer a look ahead to the next sessions in this series.

Why is recognizing climate change so difficult for us?

“Do you see climate change as an existential threat?” This question never surfaced in national political debates until finally in 2020. Many things are indeed a threat to life as we know it but as we have discussed in Section 2, the nature of this problem is a threat of “eschatological” proportions on our very door step. So big that our overwhelming response has been to deny it. Thankfully, maybe we finally, might be starting, to acknowledge the elephant in the living room.

What Can One Person Do?

Still, most of us have similar reactions; we feel there is little I can do about it. It’s just too overwhelming. In this complex world, leave it to the scientists, the politicians, the corporations, the nations of the world.

As people of faith we promise in our baptismal creeds to love our neighbor as ourselves and to promote justice among all human beings. We usually do our best in matters of personal morality and social justice. But when it comes to this, where do we as individuals even begin?

Ethicist, Larry Rasmussen puts this question into the real context of our time. In this new era “*everything turns on our actions and choices, with consequences for present as well as distant generations of humankind, together with the other relatives aboard the ark.*” In a nutshell, the new reality means ethics for our era has become “*an utterly practical affair.*”

Our spiritual traditions have a deep heritage of respect for the natural world. But on a practical level this moves against the irresistible force of our modern economic order. For this to take hold will demand a deep moral transformation both for the individual and society.

There is much that we can do

As it turns out there is much we can do as individuals once we begin to personally recognize what is at stake in our time. How do the conveniences we take for granted impact other people, / other living beings, / this Earth, our island home? In this session we will look at some of the implications of a new life style, / new ways of living in relationship with our natural world, / new ways of loving God and our neighbor.

Take some time as a group to discuss one or two of these questions. (5-8 min.)

Introduction:

1. What signs in our society do you see that we may be awakening to the reality of the climate crisis?
2. Why has it been so difficult to acknowledge?
3. What does it mean to say that ethics for our time has become utterly practical?
Why are the impacts of our actions on the natural world a moral issue?

At the United Nations climate conference in Paris in 2015 governments agreed to a long term goal of limiting the increase in global average temperature to well below 2°C and, if possible to limit the increase to 1.5° C.

As you can see from the slide emissions would have to be close to net zero by 2050 to have any chance of meeting even the 2° C goal. At the present time the world is on a path to reach 1.5 °C by 2030 and 3° C by 2050, so rapid reductions in emissions are required both by households and industry if we are going to meet the goals of the Paris agreement.

As Americans, we have a special responsibility. Due to our lifestyle based on overconsumption we consume much more than our share of the planet's resources, and as a result our carbon emissions per person are by far the highest of any major country.

What can we do about high carbon emissions? In fact we can each do something and our choices do matter. If we take both direct and indirect carbon emissions into account our choices could impact every sector of the economy because industry and agriculture provide the goods and services we buy.

One big source of indirect emissions is the production and consumption of food.

Food is responsible for at least 25% of all greenhouse gas emissions, if you include, farming, processing, transportation and cooking. So lowering your carbon footprint for food (often referred to now as your "foodprint") has a big impact. By far the biggest impact is obtained by reducing your consumption of meat, especially beef, and dairy products.

Ruminants, such as cattle, sheep and goats produce large amounts of methane in the process of digestion. As mentioned above, methane is a powerful greenhouse gas, in fact it's 84 times more powerful than carbon dioxide, making ruminants a major source of greenhouse gas emissions. You can see from the slide, which converts methane to carbon dioxide equivalents, that cattle and sheep are responsible for much higher emissions than other animals or fish. Vegetables have a much lower carbon footprint than meat, so moving towards a meatless diet, or even simply eliminating beef from your diet, can have a large impact on your personal carbon footprint.

If you have a garden, in particular a vegetable garden, you can practice regenerative gardening, which is based on the practices of regenerative agriculture. Here's a field being grown with the practices of regenerative agriculture. These practices increase the ability of the soil to absorb carbon dioxide, which offsets carbon emissions.

As well as eating the right food it is important not to waste food. As the slide says "There is No Waste in Nature", but unfortunately Americans waste over 40% of the food they purchase. Eliminating this food waste of course also eliminates the greenhouse gas emissions that would have come from producing the food.

In fact cutting back on all kinds of waste will lower your carbon footprint. The most direct way to reduce waste is to reduce the amount of products that you buy. So adopt a more sustainable simple lifestyle and only buy what you really need. Reuse what you can't reduce and if possible buy reusable products that do not involve single use plastics or large amounts of paper or cardboard. Instead join the zero waste movement using reusable tote bags and glass containers, and shopping at zero waste food stores.

Reducing the amount of trash that is sent to the landfill by recycling will have an impact because landfills generate methane. Another way to recycle is to donate goods you no longer need to a local thrift store (and buy goods at a thrift store).

If in your area electricity is generated mainly by using renewable energy, such as solar or wind, you can lower your carbon emissions by switching your appliances and furnace from natural gas to electricity. Highly efficient heat pumps, which use electricity to transfer energy into your house from the outside air or ground, can replace natural gas furnaces and water heaters. Heat pumps are versatile and can also be used in the summer for air conditioning.

We encourage you to take a few moments to discuss the parts of your climate footprint. What are the major impacts of individual actions on the climate?

Let's look at how you can make a difference. There are some simple things that are good for your health and the health of the planet. For example, eating more greens from your farmers' market.

Our family has found fun ways to shift our consumption. When our daughter thought she might be having some sensitivity to milk products, we explored other options. We found that mixing oats and water in our blender provided a tasty alternative with a much lower carbon footprint.

Let's look at how we can work together to make an even bigger difference.

Sustain Island Home

A powerful way of working toward solutions is to recognize that as individuals, "*We are all intricate, / interconnected / parts of complex social structures and cultures...*" --- We need to move beyond seeing ourself as an individual "I" to seeing ourselves together as a "We." We need to leverage our power as communities.

The Diocese of California has capitalized on this approach to aggregate the combined power of individual households of Episcopalians across the United States. The 79th General Convention in 2018 endorsed the online resource, *www.Sustain Island Home*, which was introduced in 2019, available in all dioceses.

Create a Parish Team

It begins by individual churches creating a parish team as households join together. With an online account you can ---

1. see your group aggregate results,
2. *share* how and what all participants are doing and
3. *support* one another as a community in the goal of improving your sustainability.

How it works:

1. Create your profile

It's easy to get started. Create your household profile and enter some information your current activities so we can track your success!

2. Take sustainable actions

Browse a list of actions that will help reduce your impact, then add them to your dashboard. We'll help with next steps, costs, and questions.

3. Work together

When you create your account, you will automatically be added to your local congregation group! Work to-

gether and help each other succeed!

Solar Panels

In my own household, we installed solar panels when it became clear that PG&E was going to soon be raising rates substantially. With a 6% loan to purchase the panels it was a way to freeze our electric expenses actually below our previous monthly pmt. -- With no upfront costs.

Our Progress

The promise of this approach is just beginning. Presently there are about 1600 households participating. The Diocese of El Camino Real with 60 participants ranks so far as #7 out of a total of 69 dioceses.

National Episcopal Church Statistics

These are the statistics for tracking your household and together with others, your parish, and then your diocese and participants across the whole Episcopal Church.

Movement

Bill McKibben writes, "*Movements are what take 5-10% of people and make them decisive – because in a world where apathy rules, 5-10% is an enormous number.*" Movements change how we think and how we see the world.

If 1.5 million households in the Episcopal Church joined together, possibly 6-8 million tons of CO2 emission could be reduced per year, equal in size to a small nation. For detailed information about how to get started as a parish, go to: <https://diocal.org/climate>.

Live Simply So that Others May Simply Live

In the Episcopal Church teaching about stewardship is very familiar. Usually we equate it with the support of our congregations in their internal life and outreach.

But Stewardship has a larger dimension when we recognize it as another word for management, not just for our finances but for our whole lives. It's everything we do, / with all that we have, / all of the time.

In our Baptismal promises we see ourselves as accountable to one another and to God for the proper management of our lives. ----

How do we love God with our whole being? ----

How do we love our neighbor as ourself? ----

How do we see and serve Christ in one another? ----

How do we promote justice among all human beings? ----

These are strikingly large commitments and they are what we promise at our baptism into Christ.

Stewardship in this way puts things into perspective and gives us motivation to live simply as a way to leverage all the resources at my disposal to join myself with what God is doing in the world. It is the way we begin to respond to the crying needs and injustices that endanger life all around us.

No Planet B

Our time is one where we can no longer leave the planet off our ledger for proper management. If we do, we will lose this, our fragile island home. It is the only one we have. There is no planet B where we can relocate. We are past due to clean up our own house.

In the words of a wise teacher, “*If we are going to be here on this planet at all, we might as well be here wisely and kindly, joyfully, and creatively, making of this fragile earth, our island home, a place of healing and wonder, not boredom and mean spiritedness.*” [Cynthia Bourgeault, *Eye of the Heart*, Shambala, 2020, p. 183]

Here are some discussion topics for how you can make a difference:

- Has your congregation joined the Episcopal church’s www.SustainIslandHome.org? How is stewardship part of our Baptismal promises? How is it part of the climate justice movement? Where do you see opportunities to live more simply so that others may simply live?
- What will you do? Here’s an example of a “green card” that we shared with members of our congregation during stewardship time. It lays out some of the most impactful and readily accomplished ways to reduce your carbon footprints.
- While it’s important for each of us to do everything we can, we also need to advocate for policies that will shift what companies do. Did you know that 100 companies account for 71% of the GHG emissions worldwide? [The Carbon Majors Database, CDP Carbon Majors Report 2017.] In an upcoming session, learn how you can help turn the levers of power to make a big difference.

As we conclude, please take some time to invite each participant to share one or more items that you want to do for the health of creation.

Additional resources:

Sustain Island Home www.SustainIslandHome.org with additional guidance about parish start up see www.diocal.org/climate.

Awareness of climate change and call to stewardship from multiple faith traditions (see book, *Rooted and Rising: Voices of Courage in a Time of Climate Crisis*, by Leah D. Schade and Margaret Bullitt-Jonas, 2019)

Presentations and discussions about climate change and creation care in 2020 (see recorded webinar series sponsored by St. Timothy’s Episcopal Church, Mountain View, CA, at www.sttims.org/creationcare/)

Regenerative agriculture as a tool to sequester carbon (see the documentary: *Kiss the Ground*, Netflix)