**Green Starters:**

Short, sharp thoughts on what rings bells for climate crisis in the Lectionary readings for Season of Creation 2022.

(\*\*\*not a commentary, but use of commentary may support where you go from here)

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**Star rating**: (an indication of how far you might need to ‘dig’ to find the green thread.)

★ **=really hard work** ★ ★**= not immediately apparent** ★ ★ ★**=any competent preacher can handle this** ★ ★ ★ ★**=really useful** ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ **= ideal**

**WEEK 1:**

**WHO *IS* THE EARTH?**

**Jeremiah 18:1-11** ★ ★ ★

**Potter and clay**

Recycling and repurposing is a lot easier ***before*** you’ve ‘fired the clay’.

Whatever is ‘set in stone’ is fit only to be thrown away, rather than repurposed, once it’s had its day.

What, instead, can be done with the last mess you’ve got into? Jeremiah’s God displays a remarkable absence of malice, vengefulness, and favouritism. Some Christians like to hide behind an image of an absolutely decisive God, and use “God’s in charge” both as an excuse to disengage from environmental commitment.

But this God is so much “in charge” that they are free to change their mind according both to the evil and good aspirations of a nation: For Jeremiah a disastrous outcome of injustice is as much “the will of God” and “for the good” as the prospering of a nation whom God equips with the wherewithal for justice.

How threatening a thought might it be for a nation persisting in fossil fuel exploration and neglecting a just transition, in the full knowledge that these things harm our human and animal neighbours in our Common Home, that as George MacLeod put it, God might ***“be in favour of the other side?***”

**Psalm 139:1-5, 12-17** ★ ★ ★

**God’s attentive affirmation**

Though the Psalmist’s God starts out even more worryingly intrusive than a list-keeping Santa, in the first half of the Psalm, they nonetheless acknowledge that God’s close interest in us is affirming rather than threatening. Our own wonderfulness comes not only from God’s interest in us, but also from the marvel of Creation of whom we are part. Which is still problematic.

The deep wonder appropriate to an awareness of how we are ‘made’ can be disablingly dazzling. Knowing that you don’t know all there is to know is a very practical wisdom, though it must not detract from the cautious intentionality of our direct intervention in the processes of Creation.

With close to eight billion humans, our impact - knowing or otherwise - is greater than any other species, so we’re already putting our feet in it.

The Psalm’s value is as a challenge to the illusions both that we know, dictate and control Creation, and that we lack a place purpose and partnership within the life of the Planet.

**Deuteronomy 30:15-20** ★ ★ ★ ★

**God loves you.You have been warned.**

A huge proportion of Scripture is devoted to warnings, which are expressions of love. The writers of Deuteronomy are hugely preoccupied with the lure of the abusive cults of “other gods” , though at least equal harm results to ourselves - and even more, to others - from our “bowing down and serving” the cults of money, warfare, the power of fossil fuels, with all the mystique that still surrounds them. The cult of *apathy* surrenders still more power to polluting philosophies.

This passage encourages us to make clear and well-informed choices, resisting fake science, fake news, and any form of religion which encourages complacency and disengagement. Even if it bears the right sort of label!

**Psalm 1** ★ ★ ★

**Be happy, be wise, like trees**

Wishful thinking? is it enough to be constantly ‘mindful’ of God’s warnings in scripture and the signs of our times? Is the demise of the wicked guaranteed? Perhaps, but in a shared planetary home, they take the innocent with them.

Otherwise, the Psalm offers us a reminder of the importance of trees, their nurture, and their relationship with the management of waters, flooding etc. All those things well known to ancient and indigenous peoples, which seem like recent discoveries in an arrogant age of science.

**Philemon 1-21** ★ ★ ★

**Go on, go on, go on....**

Whining and wheedling..... Paul uses every trick in the book to put moral and emotional pressure on the recipient of the letter to treat well the enslaved young man, in a way which goes well beyond the common sense and accepted “decency” of their society.

Even from prison, he puts his money where his mouth is too, taking the risk that Philemon might be mean enough to take him up on the offer.

But isn’t this, actually, in all its craftiness, an entirely appropriate use of the faith they share and the influence accusing to Paul through it?

If a respectable local or national church evaded fair trade, or behaved as if prayers are a green-free zone, what might be a justifiably crafty - and above all, lovingly effective - strategy to enrich the life, work and worship of that community?

Or are we not that desperate?

**Luke 14:25-33** ★ ★ ★

**Jesus, the personal trainer**

Love your neighbour as yourself! Zero emissions! Turn the other cheek! Wildlife welcome! Great idea! Then exceptions and excuses pile up.

Luke gives us Jesus at his most brutally shocking, because he’s striving to ensure that his teaching is not watered down beyond recognition.

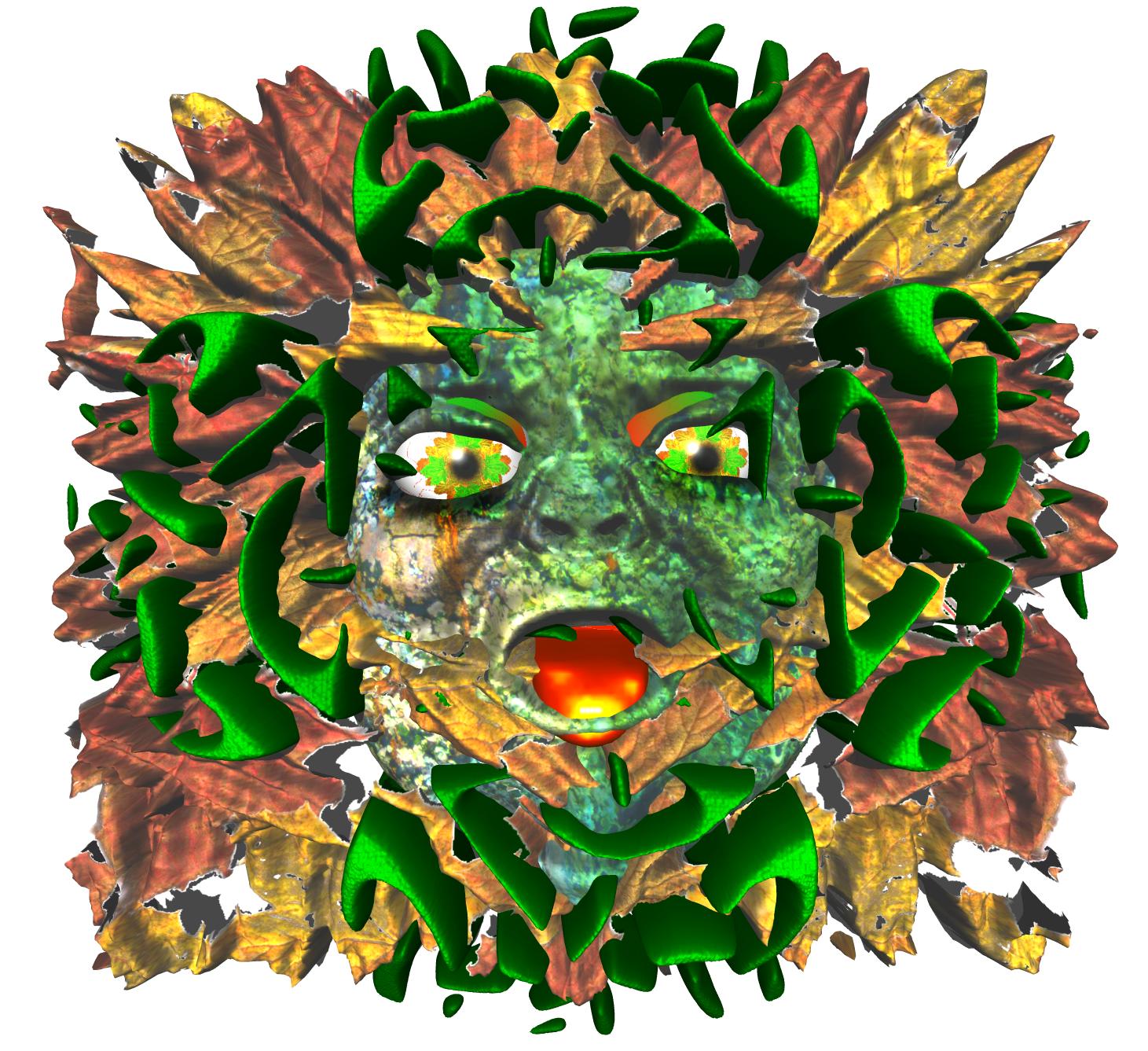
”if you do not give up all your possessions”. If you do not hate... everything you love!

Everything listed has power to divert the most determined of us from our chosen course. We’re shockingly familiar with this scenario in climate action. We drill for oil, drive cars, factory-farm meat, and buy the products of all such activities, whilst organising events that seem to encourage us to stop them.

Concentrate on the alarm and urgency built into the parable examples: the twin sufferings most feared by Bible writers: humiliation and the unrestrained violence done by a victorious army.

Discipleship as Jesus presents, is not membership in a club with a direct debit subscription, but face-to-face, look-you-in-the-eyes accountability and responsibility.

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**WEEK 2:**

**WHO *SPEAKS FOR* THE EARTH?**

**Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28** ★ ★ ★ ★

**Earth involved in justice**

The natural relationship of injustice and environmental turmoil is as much a matter of course for Jeremiah, as it now has become for us, well past the time when the increased frequency of freak environmental events are merely part of what’s expected “to winnow or cleanse”.

This relationship grows alarmingly with every increment in global temperature, and “God’s *poor* people” are those hit first and hardest.

There is momentum to be accepted, though not the loss of hope. Even the worst-case scenarios for the rest of our lifetimes are not ‘the end of the world", though the skills we do have need urgently to be recycled, repurposed in wholesale transition with justice built in. As Alastair McIntosh has said, “the science is quite bad enough to be good enough to take [radical ] action.”

**Psalm 14** ★ ★ ★

**Toxic stupidity?**

A truly terrible, and rather confusing Psalm, which benefits from reading in many different versions to open up nuances.

Despite the opening words, this is less critique of atheism than of the sheer folly, familiar in days of ‘Code Red’, of action without regard to consequence, and the horror of being caught up in a nation or culture where nothing restrains greed.

There’s a hint that for one generation at least, (as in the desert wanderings), it may be too late

However...

Because God is the ‘refuge of the afflicted’, where even the poor, the victims of injustice, are tainted by the corruption of the nation, though those hit first and hardest stand most chance of making the necessary changes. In a totally corrupt human ‘world' the victims are the most likely saviours. The innocent bystanders of Creation are the key to “salvation.”

**Exodus 32:7-14** ★ ★ ★

**Extinction averted, but damage still done**

God’s change of mind is the (slender?) hope brought down the mountain by Moses. And dearly bought, with what is itself one of the most remarkable acts of hope in the pages of the Old Testament, where, so often, the anger of God functions like cause and effect. In terms of the story, ‘disaster’ was well past the tipping-point. On Moses’ return, an even more terrible incident follows, worthy of ‘Game of Thrones,’ where loyalty is measured by your willingness to murder family and friends. Oh, and a plague, too!

Disaster comes more through stupidity than evil: disregarding warnings, and being deceived by glamorous ‘solutions’, rather than costly guidance to build resilience to the situation in which we do find ourselves.

**Psalm 51:1-11** ★ ★

**Life repurposed**

Self-indulgently regretful, spilling over into that dangerous claim that anyone can be ‘wicked from birth’, nonetheless, the Psalm offers hope, not through submission or punishment, but constructive repurposing of a life gone astray, with or without our own doing or intention. Putting things right is more important than pinning blame.

In ‘enviromental’ terms: Whatever the carbon footprint you start from, you too can be green as the lowland hills.

The Psalmist prioritises carrot over stick. Joy and gladness are an essential, not a trivial accompaniment of the struggle to change. They are also a sign of a healthy church, and a wisely shared commitment to care for the Earth we love, rather than ‘penal servitude’.

For the good of all Creation: don’t waste time with ‘beating yourself up’. Get on with it!

**The Epistle**

**1 Timothy 1:12-17** ★ ★ ★

**Even you....**

The polluter gone green; the fossil fuel executive turned eco-warrior; the steak and burger man who suddenly turns up vegan, the professional greenwasher convincingly spreading the truth about the climate crisis.... What surprising and liberating corners have you turned in your life? Or your family, friends? Or are converts even more off-putting than the consistently pious?

What, in your own story, could encourage others? What might, if you make a change today?

**Luke 15:1-10** ★ ★ ★ ★

**Sacred celebration**

A very traditional reading fits perfectly well for the Season of Creation. However: the game of ‘winning an argument’ is not fit for purpose. We convince ourselves and others of the truth and urgency of action in all our activities, or everyone loses. But don’t stint on celebration and encouragement: make sure that “first small step” is neither the last nor the greatest. Encouragement, of yourself and others, is a sacred duty.

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**WEEK 3:**

**WHO *CARES FOR* THE EARTH?**

**Jeremiah 8:18-9:1** ★ ★ ★

**Bad news is also the truth**

EcoChaplaincy is a combination of **Jeremiah** - the prophet of total and brutal social breakdown, such as some already expect - and **Barnabus** [Acts 4] the Encourager. How do we tell the alarming truth compellingly enough that people take what action they can before too many tipping-points are passed. For the worship of ‘foreign idols’, read every determination to put profit before planet, and the cult of single-use, throwaway endless growth, blocking re-use and transition with scare stories about the cost of change, rather than the hidden cost of a continuing “'suicidal war' on nature - [UN chief Antonio Guterres, December 2020 https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-55147647 ]

**Psalm 79:1-9** ★ ★

**Damage is done - to whom do we go?**

Psalm 79 parallels the most strident voices of our own time, leaping ahead to the extreme ‘worst-case’ possibilities of total social breakdown, should the promises made at COP and elsewhere be completely evaded. These scarier parts of Scripture, which are a spiritual response to threat, gradually look more like news reports than picturesque ancient writing. But that they are included in the Bible gives us resources to build spiritual resilience.

The Psalmist accepts, desperately, that their people have made bad choices. And prays not for peace, but for the suffering of their enemies.

Would ***we*** heed Jesus’ teaching to the contrary in such circumstances? [cf Matt 5:44] Could we start now, just in case?

**Amos 8:4-7** ★ ★ ★

**Follow the money- find the cause!**

Amos expresses the anger of God at economic injustice, which is the key driver of environmental harm. The Fair Trade movement has been one of the most influential in the life of our churches. It requires integrity at all levels, but also a level of compassion, without which trade cannot be to the benefit of all. Money is not neutral: it always reflects the prejudices of those who use it. Strong and well-enforced environmental regulations will be resisted only by those who look for profit at the cost of the Earth. The ‘freedom’ of the economically powerful (and their proven huge environmental impact) needs to be recognised as toxic to the “poor”.

**Psalm 113** ★ ★

**Happiness: the most subversive choice.**

The will of God is the prosperity and happiness of all. Within our common home bounded by Sky ( heaven) and Earth, no praise of God is valid which neglects to attend to poverty and to family life; no loyalty to ‘nation’ excuses human leaders who look down, rather than ‘raise up’. If God ‘in the highest’ can ‘stoop’, what excuse do we have for exclusive privilege?

**1 Timothy 2:1-7** ★ ★ ★

**Pray for them: vote them out!**

The ‘knowledge of the truth’ need not be taken narrowly. Awareness of global crisis is a fitting foundation for all prayer; changing minds and hearts to the will of God.

Prayer for an unjust ruler may be expressed in voting them out of power because support for climate evasion or denial, or for corruption and lies, is contrary to the purpose of prayer: “that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity”.

The first audience for this letter had far less power than you do, and needed all the more to reserve even token rebellion for the most acute circumstances. You express power in your vote, your financial choices, and the decisions you make about others.

When yourself wield power, include yourself in prayer. See if you behave differently.

**Luke 16:1-13** ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

**Grabbing justice from the teeth of corruption?**

‘Stewardship Christianity’ that comfortable tendency of recent years, is no longer fit for purpose: treating all life like a soul-less commodity, or as property signed over entirely to our species, rather than embracing consultative partnership with the Earth.

Is this, however, the sort of “stewardship” we really are actually called to: lovable rogues, rather than grim rule-keepers who collaborate with oppression and environmental disaster?

This story is a gift for our day: both with Jesus’ characteristic admonition to ‘Children of Light’ to reclaim craftiness as a Gospel virtue, and the description of the wealth that the steward/manager has charge of as ‘unjust wealth’, set in perspective as a negotiable means to the end of fellowship and hospitality. Wealth is not neutral.

It is well established that fossil fuel companies continue to bankroll the denial of climate change and its devastating effects. Faithfulness to “wealth-of-dubious-justice” gives rise to wilful deception, taking advantage of ignorance and gullibility.

Do not assume that the wealthy – and actually unjust – master in this parable is God. The closest we have got to meeting God face to face is in a poor, and possibly redundant carpenter.

This master is a predator. He’s not bothered whether the reports are true: the mere accusation is enough for him to yell, ‘You’re fired!’ (Although clearly there’s a custom of ‘working your notice’ taken for granted in the story, through which the “steward” triumphs.)

What does Jesus mean when he talks about ‘faithfulness with dishonest wealth?’ If the right master to serve, exclusively, is God, then the crafty generosity, which liberates from hardship, is faithfulness to the God who values God’s people, creatures and planet.

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**WEEK 4:**

**EARTH AS PROPHET**

**Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15** ★ ★ ★ ★

**Investing when the market is down....**

Despite his ‘Prophet of Doom’ credentials, Jeremiah here expresses rebellious hope by investing in a far-from certain future. Are we prepared to model a better and more sustainable life in the choices we make with the resources in our hands? Even the replacement home or church boiler?

**Psalm 91:1-6, 14-16** ★ ★ ★

**Resilience with God**

None of the dangers and threats are abolished by the prayer of the Psalmist, but all of them are better faced, and maybe some escaped, though the spiritual resilience of faith in God. We do not fix the world by changing a light-bulb, but the prayer which such small actions represent, better prepares us to face what lies ahead.

**Amos 6:1a,4-7** ★ ★ ★

**Fat cats beware!**

Self-deception and detachment from the costly realities which underly extravagant affluence are the thin veil which makes possible the ultimately unsustainable ‘revelry of the loungers’. The mention of ‘David’ reminds us that our faith can also be practised in alienation from the needs and realities of Earth and those who live more directly in relationship with Earth.

Considering the huge changes in climate authoritatively expected even by 2030, whom does a consumer lifestyle - oblivious to poverty and climate - most endanger?

**Psalm 146** ★ ★ ★

**To find God - look down!**

If you want to find God, and rejoice in that finding, look down, rather than up! And there’s real, sustaining joy built in to praising a God who’s so conspicuously worthy of that praise, through solidarity, above all, with creatures in most need.

Even though that outstanding need, prohibiting complacency, continues to challenge our faithfulness.

The cyclic aspect of nature is taken as read: cycles of water, carbon, and nutrients participate in God’s triumph over vain aspirations to permanence and absolute power by human rulers who, like every other creature ‘return to dust’. A befriending of mortality is the beginning of a closer walk with God. If you refuse to acknowledge threat, you’ll blunder into it.

**1 Timothy 6:6-19** ★ ★ ★ ★

**Joy in enough!**

Green Christian’s ‘Joy in enough’ project [ https://joyinenough.org ] offers resources to investigate the wonderful freedom from the compulsion to pile up possessions and riches. As a local pastor, I sometimes prayed to be delivered from the woes of the rich!

And yet there is such power immersively exercised by public opinion and every aspect of the media to keep us under the thumb of the idolatry of ‘only more is better’ distorting even our perception of God. ‘Eternal’ life ends up as defined only as ‘endless’ rather than, primarily, a participation, within this present age, in God’s care for the World.

And if or when we do find ourselves well off: what a lovely opportunity to do good. Globally, however, wealth demonstrably goes together with an extreme environmental impact. It’s not always possible to hold on to “unjust wealth” in order to use it for good.

**The Gospel**

**Luke 16:19-31** ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

**What you don’t know, but should know, will hurt you!**

The Hebrew Bible ***should*** be “enough” to shift minds and hearts. Yet this folk-tale employed by Jesus adds to it! For injustice, even without malice, ultimately harms everything we love. And obliviousness to the crisis on our own doorstep is not an excuse, but a choice.

The story gains power by its urgency : ***now*** is the time to wake up, take notice. There is such a thing as ‘too late’, and we should thank God for every chance to be aware of this.

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**WEEK 5:**

**EARTH AS FRIEND**

**Lamentations 1:1-6** ★ ★ ★ **with Lamentations 3:19-26** ★ ★ ★

**Lament- but that’s not the only story.**

The crushingly tragic experiences of ‘God’s people’ recorded in Lamentations should be approached with care. Likewise the current popular trend towards ‘lament’ over the state of the planet and humanity’s broken relationship with the Earth. Bible studies on the book of Lamentations in places already tragically impacted by climate change have yielded hope, at least as people recognise the inclusion of comparable tragedy in the pages of scripture. Nonetheless, I would be wary of directing a congregation towards perpetual mourning, or grief without end, even as we acknowledge hurt, frustration and confusion. Rather, the constructive and sustaining spirituality of oppressed peoples: “hosanna” ( God help us!) rather than “hallelujah” (rejoicing in help received) leads us forward in hope for the long haul. Don’t get bogged down, even in rational despair. Although hurt needs acknowledgment and a roadmap towards healing, and in the ‘response’ of Lam 3: 19-26, realistic hope goes together with faith, leading us in different paths from despair.

**Psalm 137** ★ ★

**Uncensored!**

Psalm 137 is a visceral memorial of bitterness and the last-gasp resistance of the powerless in the face of merciless humiliation, and the exercise of power beyond even the aims of the powerful. It has been recycled into a sing-along song of longing and exile by various communities, but who dares preach on the horrible curses of verse 8 and 9?

I’m reminded of the statement by scientists at COP that the Earth can remain “our friend” up to 1.5 degrees of global warming. Beyond that, like the exiles in Babylon, unable find comfort in waters and trees, Earth will be pushed too far - and sing along with the exiles!

Sing this for the Earth, when our friends in the churches hesitate and evade urgent change.

**Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4** ★ ★ ★

**Crisis has causes**

Unremitting bad news is not just a function of what it’s hoped will sell newspapers; it often characterises what drops daily into my in-tray as EcoChaplain. Studies from scientists accompany the sluggishness of nations to implement their net-zero promises.

That’s when the sustaining encouragement of a local church, taking their carbon footprint in hand as a response of faith, shaping a community fruit or nature gardener even installing EV charging and bike racks acquires an unexpected significance as a prayer of hope.

Like the violence Habbakuk bemoans, Climate crisis is not ‘natural’: it is inflicted on the Earth, the animals, and the homelands people share.

But even more challenging than bad news is when we recognise that our current dependency on fossil fuels and the system that supports it really will end. That’s when we look urgently to God to build us up now to face the transition.

**Psalm 37:1-10** ★ ★ ★ ★

**Don’t let it get to you!**

In these verses we hear a call to develop our partnership with the Land: To ‘possess’ it, as other creatures possess a habitat. When churches plant orchards, they discover it’s a lifetime’s relationship, not a slot-machine experience. ‘Evildoers’ - that is, in this song, those without commitment cannot hope to prosper or survive. We could waste time and energy in outrage. But these are more fruitfully invested in care for the Earth.

**2 Timothy 1:1-14** ★

**Wherever you are: build community!**

Fully to build community as the church of Jesus Christ is as green an aim as any. Sometimes that is to be accepted, with or without overt and explicit references, though in isolation from that insight, this passage would need special care.

**Luke 17:5-10** ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

**If you can, should you?**

When Jesus trains disciples, ‘faith’ - trust - emerges as a power to push beyond expectation:.

Faith inspires faith: it brings such an appreciation of the personality of Creation, that a tree, when addressed by the faithful, would obediently relocate to an inappropriate planting. And yet, even faith can be misused, maybe even in this example: “the right tree in the right place” a watchword for scientists at COP reminds us of the necessary corrective of love in our intervention in Creation.

Then that wonderful relativisation of blind obdience: “worthless servants/slaves do only what they ought to have done.” . In the climate crisis, those entrusted with care for the Earth - and that’s our species - may need to go above and beyond what seems normal.