

# As Long as the Earth Endures

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Imagine we came across a man at the edge of a forest in a heavy rainfall. This man is dying of thirst. He has an ax in his hand and he is felling trees in order to suck sap from the trunks. There are a few mouthfuls in each tree. All around him is devastation, dead trees, no birdsong, and he knows the forest is vanishing. So why doesn't he tip back his head and drink the rain? (This strikes us, I believe, as a simple and reasonable solution...and the best way to solve the problem of quenching his thirst because it carries no natural devastation). Just throw your head back and drink the rain and leave the trees alone. But he persists on the method that destroys the forest. Why? Because he's an expert on cutting trees...because he has always done it this way...and because the kind of people who advocate rain-drinking are suspicious types.

This image, as accounted by Ian McEwan, serves precisely as the maddening reality we face today as the 112<sup>th</sup> Congress has begun to wield its power to return this country to an era long ago. Darrell Issa, Republican representative from California, now chairman of the House oversight and Government Reform Committee, will have wide subpoena powers which he plans to use extensively, not to investigate behavior of huge corporations, but climate scientists. Oh those suspicious types who want to avert natural devastation. Their observations and conclusions are bad for business; run contrary to the way we've managed things around here forever. At least 250 years since the Industrial Revolution. We're pretty expert at drilling for oil and burning fossil fuels.

Two months ago The New Yorker Magazine published a piece about Issa and also House majority leader, John Boehner who when asked by ABC's George Stephanopolous about climate change, said: "The idea that carbon dioxide is a carcinogen, that it is harmful to our environment, is almost comical."

In 1921 Albert Einstein demonstrated how easy it was (metaphorically speaking) to throw our head back and drink the rain, take advantage of the natural resources around us rather than destroying them – when he proved that a single photon from the sun, striking a semiconductor, releases an electron and so electricity is born – right out of sunbeams. Today we call it photovoltaics and as part of our Capital Campaign we intend to throw a whole lot of those solar panels onto our roof. Einstein won his first Nobel Prize in physics that year – 1921 - for describing the process of turning sunlight into electricity. Would he be handed a subpoena by Darrell Issa if Issa were in the House at that time? Are Unitarians part of those suspicious types? (I think we are).

The science of climate change has an interesting beginning, starting with Darwin's contemporary scientist, an Irishman by the name of John Tyndall. Tyndall began studying the atmosphere in 1859, the same year that Darwin published *Origin of*

*Species.* Tyndall focused on light, and was actually the first to answer the riddle asked by every five-year old of their parents: “Why is the sky blue?” Tyndall’s answer, which I wish I knew 25 years ago, was simply the scattering of light by the atmosphere.

But Tyndall was also the first to name and explain the hothouse or greenhouse effect. He built experimental equipment that showed how water vapor, carbon dioxide, and other gases prevented the earth’s warmth from the sun being radiated back out into space and so make life impossible.

In the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and with each advancing year we began to understand how a molecule of CO<sub>2</sub> absorbed light and trapped heat. The more CO<sub>2</sub>, the warmer the planet. Then in the 1960’s an unmanned satellite exposed our neighbor Venus with having an atmosphere of which 95% was comprised of carbon dioxide. The surface of Venus is about 460 degrees centigrade, but without this greenhouse effect, it would have roughly the same temperature as earth. Yet speaker of the house, John Boehner finds it “comical” for anyone to suggest that carbon dioxide is harmful to our planet. What planet is he from?

Global warming deniers comprise an interesting bunch. They can’t admit, as in the metaphor of the fellow who fails to drink rain water while opting to chop down the forest...they can’t admit that following business as usual is their preference. So some rationale is needed to justify their incomprehensible position that both science and those who subscribe to the science are suspicious. This is when religion conveniently serves the deniers well, even if it’s bad or horrible theology.

At a congressional hearing in 2009, representative John Shimkus of Illinois, who had aspired to become chair of the House Committee on Energy and Commerce, dismissed the dangers of climate change by quoting Genesis 8:22 – As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease.

The interpretation of this verse makes explicit that a kind and merciful and loving and gracious God simply WILL NOT change the course of the earth. God gives to us a promise of survival. Evangelicals love this verse because it proclaims that every inclination of man’s heart is evil from childhood. So God is telling us, according to scripture, that even though we are sinners, God will still provide for our needs. God’s promise and sign about seedtime and harvest is part of His mercy and graciousness towards us.

If we combine verses 21 with 22, we get the whole package: Never again will I curse the ground because of man...And never again will I destroy all living creatures as I have done. As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat. Summer and winter, day and night will never cease.

God promises us in Genesis, written about 3000 years ago, that He will never bring catastrophe to the world again. One season will faithfully follow another in a never-ending stream until the end of times. God has established laws to make it so.

In one of Charles Schulz's Peanuts cartoons, it is raining cats and dogs, and Lucy asks the profound question: "Boy, look at it rain. What if it floods the whole world?" The only other person in the room is Linus who sometimes serves as the resident theologian. He tells Lucy that a worldwide flood is impossible since Genesis promises that God will never again flood the earth. Obviously relieved, Lucy breathes a sigh of relief and says: "You have taken a great load off my mind." Linus replies...knowingly..."Sound theology has a way of doing that."

In last week's Salt Lake Tribune, David Hart had a column published called: "Humans should quit using religion to excuse bad behavior." This was not another example of spouting off atheism as the new fad, but he used Gandhi's insight for his premise: God has no religion. What more succinct contribution can be made in the discussion of religion? God has no religion. Of course not! In other words, there are individual cultures throughout the world who claim to know God's truths and God's thoughts and biases from homosexuality to gun control to global warming. As a result, religion resists moral development in human beings. Proposition 8 is a classic example of how religion, representing an individual culture as opposed to a more universal cultural perspective, fought vehemently to deny citizens their civil liberties...in the name of God. Religion, says Hart, holds back the evolution of morality...religion acts as an excuse for humankind to avoid accepting responsibility for their bad behavior.

To proclaim, as does Shimkus, that the earth will end only when God declares its time to be over, is NOT sound theology but a convenient way to continue drinking the sap from trees in spite of the devastation it causes.

In the meantime, and you may have heard the interview with polar ecologist Bill Fraser in NPR, he has been observing and recording the habits of birds in Antarctica for 35 years. Fraser has noted some troubling changes. Penguins are rapidly declining with the cascade effects of warmer winter air and sea temperatures along the peninsula. Higher temperatures bring more snow which delays the start of mating season which results in smaller penguin chicks and higher mortality rates. Warmer seas reduce the extent of ice which their food depends on and the penguins rest upon before launching foraging trips into the Southern Ocean.

With adult penguins traveling further to fill their bellies, they leave their chicks for longer periods of time who then become vulnerable to predators. It's interesting how Fraser noted that the long carbonic reach of industrialized society is quickly wiping out one of the toughest creatures on earth, a species that's hard-wired to the polar desert and cannot adapt.

What makes this so interesting is that Rep. Joe Barton from Texas, the House's top recipient of contributions from the oil and gas industries, argues that carbon has nothing to do with climate change, and that in any event, we'll all just adapt. He said: "We it rains we find shelter. When it's hot we get shade. When it's cold we find a warm place to stay."

The 112<sup>th</sup> congress may well be on track to move us back in time even before John Tyndall discovered in 1859 the effects of greenhouse gases. NASA thermal satellite images showing the world's arctic surface temperature trends from 1981 to 2008 and the dramatic decline in sea ice cover in that duration...totally inconsequential in the belief that God made a promise to us that as long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease.

Religion masks unconscionable behavior. Given the premise that we are by nature sinners anyway, that we need the love of God and His blessings to survive, then we must take on faith that He has no evil intended towards us. And so since God is calling the shots, are we then not free to pursue our own self-interests. But I need to inquire then if God's promise is taken literally, and I would grant the religious argument total credibility, then are we not abusing God's end of the contract? I see an interesting juxtaposition being created, pitting God's providential care next to human negligence. At what point does God depend on human responsibility to make the contract more equitable? And is there not a point in such negligence that God simply throws up his hands in despair and calls the contract null and void?

To pretend that we need not worry about the environment because it's all in God's hands, embarrasses me to no end. Our role as stewards of the creation cannot be overlooked. Our failure to respond to a dying planet would not, I believe, please God. In fact, I think it's pretty unforgiveable...even for an all-loving God.