

Taking the temperature of the earth

1 September 2024

INTRODUCING TODAY'S THEME

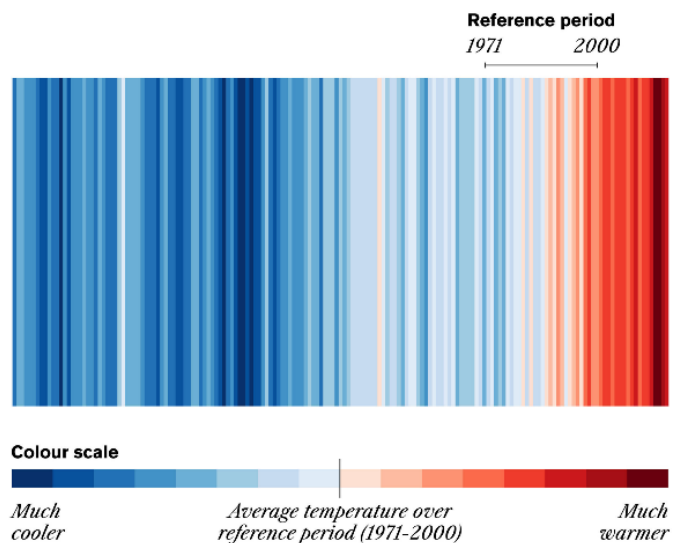
Today we're thinking about the world around us – the trees, the birds and animals, the hills and rivers.



Do you know the name of this bird? It sings beautifully.

We have a family of spinebills that live near our place and who come to drink the nectar from correa flowers.

Nature or creation is beautiful but also fragile and we humans aren't always very good at looking after the natural world. People are wearing climate scarves today showing how the world's temperature has gone from cool to hot over the last 100 years.



BIBLE READINGS

We listen for the word of God.

Our ears and our hearts are open.

[Psalm 104 \(selected verses, responsively\)](#)

Praise the Lord, my soul.

God set the earth on its foundations;

it can never be moved.

You covered it with the watery depths as with a garment;

the waters stood above the mountains.

But at your rebuke the waters fled,

at the sound of your thunder they took to flight;

they flowed over the mountains,

they went down into the valleys,

to the place you assigned for them.

You set a boundary they cannot cross;

never again will they cover the earth.

How many are your works, Lord!

In wisdom you made them all;
the earth is full of your creatures.

**There is the sea, vast and spacious,
teeming with creatures beyond number –
living things both large and small.**

All creatures look to you
to give them their food at the proper time.

**When you send your Spirit,
they are created,
and you renew the face of the ground.**

I will sing to the Lord all my life;
I will sing praise to my God as long as I live.

Praise the Lord, my soul.

Praise the Lord.

[Romans 8:19-25](#)

For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

For the word of God in Scripture,
for the word of God among us,
for the word of God within us,
thanks be to God.

MESSAGE Taking the temperature of the earth

It's the first day of spring today, but in the past two or three weeks we've already been enjoying temperatures that feel more like early summer. It feels as though the earth is running a fever and it's getting worse. These warmer temperatures are linked to **climate change**, which



is a neutral term. Depending what media you watch or listen to, this might be described as a climate **crisis** or even a climate **catastrophe**. The again, on other media it might be described as a climate **con** or climate **conspiracy**. We're going to try and see what's actually going on.

Welcome to the Season of creation!

To put it most bluntly, creation sustains our life: the air we breathe, the water we drink, the food we eat are what keeps us alive.

Creation, if we pause a moment to appreciate it, is also a source of beauty and inspiration, whether the plants and flowers at this time of year, the animals and birds and insects, the forests and mountains and rivers and oceans.



Creation is quite resilient but also fragile.

Some species can adapt more readily than others or can migrate as conditions



change. But if a creature is part of a larger ecosystem like the Great Barrier Reef, for instance, they cannot just uproot themselves and move a couple of thousand kilometres south where the oceans are cooler. Likewise the people of Vanuatu or Tuvulu can't easily move to higher ground.

Largely because of humanity's ever expanding population and greed, creation is under serious threat. That is the bad news that we are focusing on this morning. We need to hear this message loud and clear before we explore positive ways we might respond.

So today's message is not a happy one as we pause to take the temperature of the earth – measuring the earth's vital signs – as a good triage nurse might do.

My Mum had a serious fall last Sunday afternoon when she was out walking with a neighbour. Luckily for her, as with Edy last Sunday morning, some people saw



what happened and called 000 and a nurse then guided them through how to check for spinal injuries, how to roll my Mum on her side and get her to her feet and help her walk inside, because she fell just a couple of houses down the street from where she lives.

Eventually paramedics arrived and the first thing they did was to measure all her vital signs – breathing, pulse, temperature, blood pressure, muscle movement and so forth.



She was taken to Epworth Emergency Department where they continued these checks and started doing scans for fractures.

The ED doctors and nurses then patched up her wounds and other consequences of the fall, but she was admitted to the hospital so other medical teams could investigate the underlying causes of the problem that led to the fall. So both a short term response was needed but also a longer term response to see what permanent measures need to be put in place. The same types of responses are needed to address the climate crisis.

There's little doubt that creation is in serious trouble.

There are various symptoms we could examine – various vital signs – that climate scientists have been accurately measuring for several decades.



We know, for instance, that most of the Arctic sea ice has melted and glaciers everywhere are disappearing.

We know that humanity continues to cut down forests, especially in

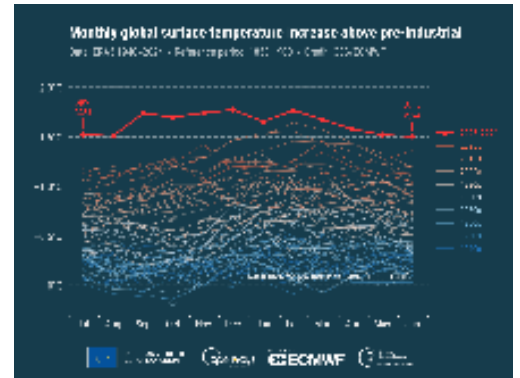
Brazil but also in many parts of Australia, usually to graze beef cattle but also to grow other cash crops like cocoa and palm oil and cotton. Along with the forests, many small mammals and reptiles are threatened with extinction as their habitat is destroyed.



We know that coral reef systems are under threat. The latest 5 yearly report on the health of the Great Barrier Reef is grim reading. There have been five mass bleaching events in the last 8 years, including one last summer that affected some 75% of the reef and its myriad of fish and

other creatures.

The starkest measure of the changing climate, though, is **temperature**. 2023 was the hottest year ever recorded since measurements began. Each month of 2024 has continued the trend, so we are on track for another new record this year. We are already 1.5 degC above the pre-industrial average.



Key points of the Paris Agreement

196 signatories, will take effect from 2020

2.0°C/1.5°C

Temperatures



The agreement aims to keep the global temperature rise this century below 2.0°C above pre-industrial levels, and "pursue efforts" to limit the rise to 1.5°C.

We're actually on track for some 3 or 4 degrees of warming by the end of this century unless we make rapid and large reductions in fossil fuel use, which looks most unlikely.

To put that in perspective, if our bodies run an elevated

temperature of 3 or 4 degrees for a length of time we can expect to feel very sick and to be in hospital.

The earth already has a fever. The climate scarves that several people knitted back in 2020 already need two new warmer colours to show how much the temperature has risen in just the last four years. Each new colour is 0.1 degrees higher, so two extra colours mean that the planet has warmed 0.2 degrees in the past four years. It's scary how fast the climate is changing!

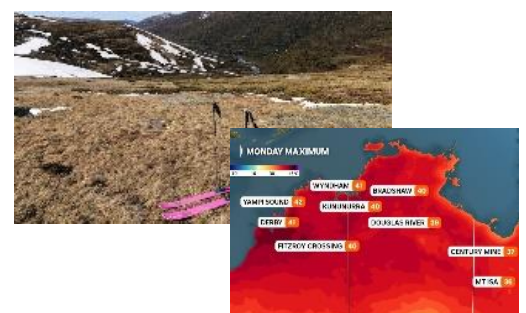
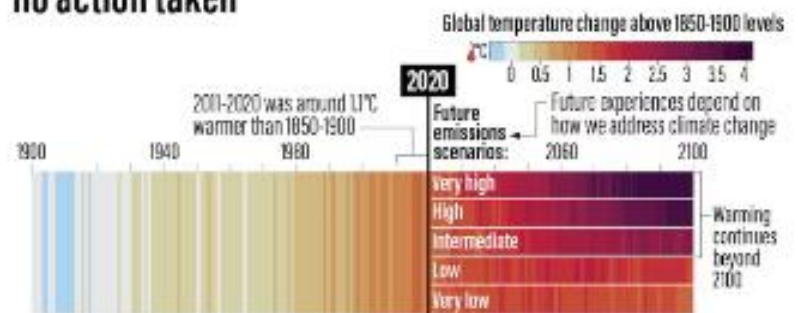
We've all been enjoying some balmy late winter weather with temperatures into the low 20s in Melbourne. These temperatures are some 7 to 9 degrees above the long term average for this time of year.

The winter snow in the alps is already almost gone ...

... while in northern Australia the temperatures this past week have been into the high 30s and 40s ... summertime temperatures in winter.

The 2015 Paris agreement aimed to limit temperature rises to less than 2 degrees this century with effort to keep below 1.5 deg rise. But global temperatures have already risen to the 1.5 degree mark in just 9 years!

Future generations at risk of hotter future if no action taken



Unlike the human body that can fight infections and bring fevers back to normal temperatures quite quickly, the earth's ocean systems are huge and take decades to warm and will take decades to cool. The longer we keep burning fossil fuels the greater the temperature rise we bake into the climate.

We know what we need to do to reduce emissions, but governments lack the political will to do what is needed or to make changes fast enough. It's interesting that if you ask climate scientists the best action we could take as individuals to curb climate change, the most common answer is to elect politicians who will take strong action on the climate.

Time for a change in direction. As we turn to Scripture for wisdom. In the words of our passage from Romans chapter 8, creation is frustrated and groaning. The passage suggests that creation is bound to decay by the will of an unnamed party. This party could be humanity given our poor track record of caring for the earth. But in Paul's thinking it's more likely that the one binding creation to decay is actually God.



Genesis 3:17-20

¹⁷ To Adam he said, "Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat of it,' "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. ¹⁸ It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field.

One of the consequences of Adam and Eve eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the garden of Eden is that God curses the ground which shall now produce thorns and thistles rather than what God intended. No longer in the garden, where food can be plucked from a easily accessible source, now it will require back-breaking labour to produce.

Paul writes that creation has been groaning in the pains of childbirth. This imagery encourages us to see creation as like a mother giving birth to new life. This new life is what sustains us, but do we see this life as a gift to be cared for or as a resource to be exploited for profit?

In the thinking of indigenous people, how can mother earth look after us if we do not look after her?

But in this passage from Romans, Paul argues that the fate and future of creation is closely tied up with the fate and future of the children of God, namely the followers of Jesus. This is a big claim to make.

But let's try to unpack and follow Paul's logic.

Creation is suffering just as followers of Jesus also suffer – whether from persecution or illness or death. Yet if Jesus has been raised from death to glorious new life, why do his followers still suffer?

This is part of the already and not yet of Paul's understanding.

As Christians we have **already** been loved by God and called children of God. We have **already** been declared righteous in God's sight. And we have **already** received the gift of God's Spirit as the firstfruits, the down payment, on all our glorious future blessings.



But here and now, we walk in the footsteps of Jesus, who suffered.

We have **not yet** been set free from death.

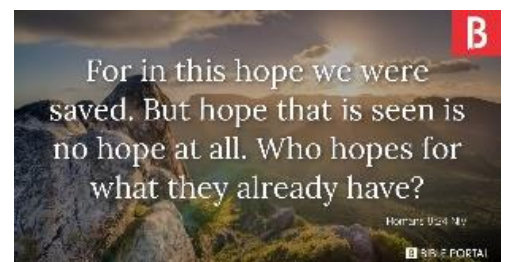
We have **not yet** received a transformed body like Jesus.

We have **not yet** gained the freedom of fully knowing God.

These are all things that we hope for.

As does creation.

Because according to Paul, creation is not ultimately destined to destruction but to transformation and renewal, just like the children of God.



And so, just as we wait with hope for a better and glorious future with God, so too creation waits for freedom and renewal.

This is part of the Christian hope for the renewal of all things.

This year's Season of creation theme is to hope and act with creation.

This is not a passive hope – just vaguely hoping for the best, waiting for some miracle, or waiting for a utopian future.

Rather it's an active hope – actively striving for new life in the midst of struggle, an intense struggle similar to childbirth.

As Paul writes earlier in Romans,



We dare to boast about our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces patient endurance, and patient endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit. (Rom 5:3-5)

We'll unpack more of this in the next few weeks, but for now it's enough to see that there is a mysterious connection between the future of faithful humanity and the future of creation. Both are groaning and suffering in the present but both eagerly await God's glorious future.

So we wait with hope. This hope is not passive waiting but more of an active verb. We are called to hope with and act with creation, which is actually resilient and tough and can recover and thrive if given the chance.

I want to close with a challenge from Common Grace, the Christian group who inspired us to knit climate scarves as a visual way of representing both climate change and our commitment to seek climate justice. Common Grace invite each of us to make a change in our lives for a few weeks during this Season of creation. But who knows, perhaps the change could become a long term habit?



Their three suggested options are these:

- Change what we **eat** – especially less meat. Add one or more vegetarian meals to our menu each week.
- Change our **transport** – drive and fly less, walk and cycle more, catch public transport where we can. Perhaps consider longer term alternatives like an E-bike or Electric Vehicle instead of a petrol car.
- Change our **shopping and purchasing habits** – especially clothing. Do we really need to buy that new item of clothing?

There are some more suggestions in the *Food for thought* article in the newsletter. So I invite you to pick at least one of these and act on it.

Paul's passage goes on to say that we are often uncertain how to pray and take action. But here too God's Spirit will help us.

So let us not lose hope but rely on God's Spirit to sustain us and inspire us to appropriate action.