Opinion
EarthBeat



A digital billboard displays an unofficial temperature, July 17, 2023, in downtown Phoenix. Millions of people around the Southwest are living through a historic heat wave. (AP Photo/Matt York)



Thomas Reese

View Author Profile

Follow on Twitter at @thomasreeseSJ

Religion News Service

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

August 10, 2023
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Anyone who does not believe in global warming after what we endured during July is so deep in denial they would not flee a burning house if their clothes were on fire. And yet millions of Americans still do not accept the facts revealed by science. Rather, they continue to believe the lies propagated by the fossil fuel industry, their political cronies and the pseudo scientists who have prostituted themselves to the industry.

Just as bad are all of us who accept the science of climate change, but don't do anything to stop the madness.

We are like frogs in a pot of water being slowly cooked as the temperature rises. We don't have the sense to get out of the pot, let alone turn off the heat.

July was the hottest month on record in all of human history. Emergency rooms in Phoenix were flooded with heatstroke victims as well as people burned by roads, sidewalks and metal equipment turned hot in the sun. Heat actually kills more people in the United States than hurricanes. Globally, 5 million people a year die from the heat.

The elderly, the sick, the poor and the homeless suffer the most from the heat. The rich and the middle class can retreat to their air-conditioned bunkers, which makes matters worse with increased CO2 emissions from the power plants that create the electricity to run our air conditioners.

Advertisement

Others died from floods caused by warm air that holds more water during storms. The Northeast was especially hard-hit this summer, while earlier Pakistan was devastated by floods. The western United States welcomed rains that filled reservoirs, but it was also hit by floods that destroyed homes and farmlands. Drought will inevitably return in the future.

The heat and floods cost billions of dollars in damage and in lost productivity. They are creating more climate refugees who must migrate to survive.

As awful as this all sounds, it is only the beginning. We are doing permanent damage to the home in which we live.

Around the world, mountain glaciers are shrinking. When they are gone, millions of people will lose dependable sources of water.

Warm water and increased acidity are killing coral reefs around the world, reefs that took hundreds of years to grow, reefs that are the nurseries of the ocean.

When these reefs are gone, it will be the end of thousands of ocean species that breed or live in the coral reefs. They will never recover. It will be the end of the oceans as we know them, along with the fish we eat.

Meanwhile, the oceans continue to rise. There is less ice in the water around Antarctica this winter, which does not have an immediate effect, but it means the ice on the continent will be threatened. There is less ice at the North Pole.

Related: Billions of federal dollars available for churches and nonprofits to go green

Not only does all this melting add to ocean levels, it also means open oceans will absorb more heat since ice reflects sunlight.

The only remaining question is how fast this climate apocalypse will come. Some scientists think the worst will not come until the next century, while others warn of tipping points that could bring it on quickly.

"If we are able to significantly reduce greenhouse gas emissions, U.S. sea level in 2100 is projected to be around 0.6 meters (2 feet) higher on average than it was in

2000," according to NOAA. "On a pathway with high greenhouse gas emissions and rapid ice sheet collapse, models project that average sea level rise for the contiguous United States could be 2.2 meters (7.2 feet) by 2100 and 3.9 meters (13 feet) by 2150."

Two climate scenarios for quicker disaster are terrifying.

One is that all the ice on Greenland destabilizes and slides into the sea. If all the Greenland ice melts, sea levels will rise by 6.5 feet. If the entire Antarctic ice sheet melts, sea levels will rise by 190 feet.

Coastal cities will be flooded, displacing hundreds of millions of people. Such a catastrophe will also upset the Atlantic Gulf Stream that warms Europe. Ironically, under global warming, Europe without the Gulf Stream could become as cold as Alaska, since they are on the same latitude.



Homes are surrounded by floodwaters in Sohbat Pur city, a district of Pakistan’s southwestern Baluchistan province, Aug. 29, 2022. Disaster officials said nearly a half million people in Pakistan were crowded into camps after losing their homes in

widespread flooding caused by unprecedented monsoon rains. (AP Photo/Zahid Hussain)

The other tipping point could come from unfreezing the Siberian permafrost, which might release enough methane (a potent greenhouse gas) to end the world as we know it. The planet could quickly warm, melting ice everywhere.

In the 22nd century and beyond, when people have forgotten the wars, the pandemics and the economic and political crises of the 20th and 21st centuries, they will not honor us for our technological innovations.

They will not care about Donald Trump or who is "woke." They will curse us for destroying our planet, their only home. Today, we ask why Germans did nothing to stop genocide under the Nazis. Future generations will ask why we did nothing to stop global warming. It's not like we did not know.

Millions will die in the coming catastrophe, perhaps half the world's population. Billions more will suffer privations on an impoverished planet for centuries to come. Governments will collapse into chaos; the whole world will look like Haiti does now.

Related: My generation needs to apologize to the class of 2022

The Earth will never recover. Perhaps in a few millennia, other species will evolve that can live in the wasteland that is Earth, but it will never be the same.

For believers this is even more depressing because we are destroying God's creation, God's greatest gift to us. Rather than treasuring this gift, we are like children who break all our toys on Christmas Day.

Christians profess that we should take up our cross and follow Jesus. Instead, we are making crosses for future generations to carry.

Jesus tells us, "Do not be afraid." I must confess that I am terrified by what is coming even though I know I will be dead before the worst happens. For once, I am happy I don't have children. I pray for a miracle, a deus ex machina, even though we do not deserve one.

To those not yet born, all I can say is, "I'm sorry." But I don't expect you to forgive us.