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# LUTHERAN STUDY GUIDE TO POPE FRANCIS' LETTER ON CLIMATE CHANGE

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## Week 1

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### Introduction: Climate Change and Faith

#### What you will need

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- Bible
- Copy of Pope Francis' Letter, *Laudato Si'* (can be found at [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html#\\_ftn165](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html#_ftn165))
- Lutheran Study Guide
- Introductory video/audio on climate change (links below, choose those best for your context)

#### Opening Prayer

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Gracious God,

Your amazing love extends through all time and space, to all parts of your creation, which you created and called good. You made a covenant with Noah and his family, putting a rainbow in the sky to symbolize your promise of love and blessing to every living creature, and to all successive generations. You



### Claimed, Gathered, and Sent in a Changing World

If you are concerned about the effects of global warming for your great-grandchildren your information is out of date. The effects of climate change are being seen more quickly than scientists originally anticipated. In his recent letter on climate change to the church and all people of “good will” Pope Francis writes, “It is no longer enough...simply to state that we should be concerned for future generations. We need to see that what is at stake is our own dignity,” (160).

The most recent **Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Report** suggests we have until about 2030—about 15 years—to make major changes in our environmental practices, economic policies, and lifestyles to avoid potentially devastating changes. The report suggests two responses: mitigation and adaptation. As we make efforts to curb the effects of climate change (mitigation) we also need to start learning to adapt to new climate realities.

This is why Pope Francis' recent letter on climate change is so important. Not only do we need to make serious changes and crucial decisions, but thus far—after 30 years of science supporting the belief that these changes are, in great part, the result of human activity—the moral and political will to take significant action has not emerged.

made a covenant with Abraham and Sarah, blessing them and their descendants throughout the generations. You made a covenant with Moses and the Israelite people to all generations, giving them the 10 commandments and challenging them to choose life. In Jesus, you invite us to enter into another covenant, in communion with all who seek to be faithful to you. As people of faith, we are called into covenant. Your covenant of faithfulness and love extends to the whole creation. We pray for the healing of the earth, that present and future generations may enjoy the fruits of creation, and continue to glorify and praise you. (from the *National Council of Churches*)

## Scripture

"Then he showed me a river of the water of life, clear as crystal, coming from the throne of God and of the Lamb..."

Read together Revelation 22: 1-22

## Notes and Glossary

**The International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)** is a scientific body under the umbrella of the United Nations. Thousands of scientists around the world contribute to the IPCC on a voluntary basis. The scientists review current studies and issue regular reports based on these studies. <http://www.ipcc.ch/organization/organization.shtml>

The IPCC's fifth, and most recent, report (2014) can be found here: <http://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar5/syr/>

Climate change is a religious issue. **Many have argued that the environmental crisis is a result of religious world views** that have encouraged us to see nature as something to be used and controlled rather than honored with gratitude. As much as religion may have been part of the problem we now face, **it is equally true that it can and must play a part in the solution.**

Climate change is also a particularly Lutheran issue. We stand in a theologically paradoxical tradition; Luther embraced paradox in his theology as God's way of keeping humanity from working our way to God (justifying ourselves) through reason. From a certain point of view **we also stand in an ecologically paradoxical tradition.** Rather than a liberating turning point in the church and world, many associate the Reformation with a series of ambiguous historical shifts paving the way for the **social and economic factors contributing to the climate crisis.**

Paradoxically, many ecumenical theologians also suggest that the **ecothological** movement first began to find its voice in Lutheran Pastor Joseph Sittler. Sittler started speaking about ecological issues already in the 1950's. He argued in his 1961 World Council of Churches speech, "Called to Unity," that ecumenical unity can only be found in the wider scope of the cosmic unity of all things in Christ. In Christ our shared home becomes a place of communion, honoring and reconciling differences of creed, tradition, race, nationality, economic status, and biology.



*Oikos*—the ancient Greek word for household or shared home—etymologically links economy, ecology, and ecumenism. Pope Francis' letter comes at a crucial time for ecumenical cooperation for the sake of our *oikos*—our shared home. We share this home with billions of people and other life forms who bear significantly less responsibility for the causes of climate change than most of us in the US—and yet they are more likely to face its devastating consequences. On the doorstep of the 500th year of the Reformation let us grasp the outstretched hands of our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters, our native religious brothers and sisters suffering most immediately from climate change, and all other "people of good will" (Pope Francis) to **"fight, work, and pray"** (Brother Martin) for climate-justice—an eco-Reformation.

**Many have argued that the environmental crisis is a result of religious world views:** Lynn White's 1967 essay, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," for example, set off an important (and continuing) debate about Christianity's role in the environmental crisis.

**It is equally true that it can and must play a part in the solution:** See Lutheran ethicist Larry Rasmussen's book, *Earth Honoring Faith: Religious Ethics in a New Key*, for more on how religions hold potential to be part of an environmental solution.

**We also stand in a ecologically paradoxical tradition:** Lutheran ecotheologian Paul Santmire emphasizes the tension and ambiguity of the Christian and Protestant tradition in relation to ecological concerns in *The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology*

**social and economic factors contributing to our climate crisis:** Sociologist Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* is the most famous argument in this regard. While his argument is frequently criticized from a historical perspective and some argue he misinterpreted Luther and

## Introductory Media on Climate change

*Choose one of the following. Watch or listen to together.*

- On faith and climate change skepticism, CNN (4 min) <http://www.cnn.com/2015/08/03/opinions/sutter-climate-skeptics-woodward-oklahoma/index.html>
- 2014 NBC report, "Our Year of Extremes: Did Climate Change Just Hit Home?" (26 min) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M8EXhJmUkNE>
- PBS, "Global Warming, the Signs and the Science" (55 min) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xVQnPytgwQo>
- NPR, "Hot in my Backyard," *This American Life* (1 hr) <http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/495/hot-in-my-backyard>

## Media and Scripture Discussion

*After listening and/or watching, share some initial reactions.*



- How do you react to news about climate change. With incredulity? Despair? Anger? Sadness? Confusion? Uncertainty? Empowerment? Share these reactions.
- What stories from the videos affected you most deeply?
- Considering your reactions, where do you see yourself in the Revelation 22 passage? Given our current situation, what resonates with you from this passage? How might God be speaking to us?
- Many times climate change is seen as an "environmental issue"—implying more concern for plants and animals than humans. In light of the human costs outlined in these media segments, how helpful do you find this description? What justice issues are at stake?

Calvin, more recently others have taken up the argument with impressive theological sophistication. (For example: see the work of John Milbank, Stephen Long, and William Cavanaugh).

**Ecotheology:** a branch of theology that pairs religious faith with care for creation and eco-justice.

**“fight, work, and pray”:** “You must feel with sorrow all the dishonor done to Christ in his holy Word, all the misery of Christendom, all the unjust suffering of the innocent, with which the world is everywhere filled to overflowing. You must fight, work, pray, and—if you cannot do more—have heartfelt sympathy,” (Luther, “On the Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ,” LW 35:54).

## Introduction to the Encyclical

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*Read sections 13-16 of the encyclical, including Pope Francis’ “appeal” and outline of the letter.*

### Discussion

- What caught your attention here?
- In 14 Pope Francis urges a “new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet.” In your view, what needs to change in the conversation in order to move forward toward solutions and change? Or what would need to change to open the conversation in the first place?
- On a large piece of paper outline together the main issues the letter will address. Bring this back each week and post it up to retain a sense of the scope of the letter.
- Also add to this paper a list of the topics Francis says he will repeatedly return to (16).
- Is there anything on this list that surprised you? Anything missing you would have expected or liked to see?

### Closing

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*Close with final reflections or comments. Invite a volunteer to close in prayer*

## Preparation for Week 2

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- Return next session with Bible, Study Guide, and Encyclical
- Optional: Reading ahead
  - Read chapter 2 of *Laudato Si’*
  - Read *The Lutheran* (2004) article, “Weathering the Storms: Global warming and faith intersect in the ELCA’s northernmost congregation,” [http://www.thelutheran.org/article/article.cfm?article\\_id=1028](http://www.thelutheran.org/article/article.cfm?article_id=1028) and optional reading, on Shishmaref in 2014: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/12/14/shishmaref-alaska-climate-change-relocation\\_n\\_6296516.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/12/14/shishmaref-alaska-climate-change-relocation_n_6296516.html)

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