Article

What type of crisis is this? A religious community's response to the 2018 Camp Fire catastrophe

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Abstract

Focusing on a single, 29-minute sermon, publicly available on YouTube, this article analyzes how two local religious leaders responded to the Camp Fire that destroyed the town of Paradise, CA, in November 2018. With an understanding of religion as crisis response and intervention, an exploration of this one sermon yielded two key themes: (1) the problem of suffering and (2) the idea of community and the duties members possess to extend care and compassion toward those who suffer. These themes within the sermon pointed further to three interrelated, ecologically-based stories-we-live-by (Stibbe, 2021) that extend beyond the sermon's specific concerns: (a) *we are in this together;* (b) *together we will make it through;* and (c) c*onfronting challenges can help us become stronger*. These three stories convey an ambivalent position with respect to climate disaster. They contain "beneficial story" elements, for example, as they point to a common human identity orientation (CHI) and emphasize hope and resilience — necessary responses in addressing the needs of climate disaster victims. At the same time, however, the exclusion of an explicit ecological crisis perspective along with the absence of a more inclusive conception of what constitutes a, or "the," community suggest elements of a more destructive story-we-live-by since such omittances can work against the sense of urgency and intercommunal collaboration needed to address the climate crisis. This oscillation, signaling ambivalence between beneficial and destructive possibilities, appears across four broad emphases that go beyond the thematic foci of the sermons: community, hope, blessing, and solidarity.

Keywords: ecolinguistics; religion; climate disaster; Camp Fire; Paradise, CA; stories we live by

1. Introduction

On November 8, 2018, just before dawn, century-old PG&E (Pacific Gas and Electric) powerlines sparked, setting ablaze drought-desiccated brush in the hills leading to the ridge on which the town of Paradise, California, sat (Daniels, 2019; Boghani, 2019).[1] Whipped by fast winds, the growing fire, moving at the rate of 24,000 feet (about 7.32 km) per minute at its peak, quickly engulfed Paradise, burning it to the ground within the span of just four hours (Boghani, 2019). Caught by the speed of the conflagration, 67 patients at Feather River Hospital clutched IV bags as they ran with doctors and nurses to trucks that would carry them between the flames to safety in nearby communities (Boghani, 2019). Eighty-five people died, nevertheless, most of them 60 years and older (Boghani, 2019). The flames would smolder for two more weeks, scorching 153,335 acres of land — an area the size of Chicago. In the end, 18,800 structures lay in ruins and approximately 30,000 people became homeless overnight (Boghani, 2019). The cost of the damage — $8.4 billion in insured property destruction — registered as among the highest cost of a climate-related disaster in the world that year (Siegler, 2019; Boghani, 2019).

The Camp Fire showed undeniable connections with <u>factors that climate change had exacerbated</u>: dried out vegetation and soil, an unprecedented, extended drought, and the stopping up of the jet stream, which had created repeated and intense heat domes over the western regions of the United States (Nuccitelli, 2021). The Union of Concerned Scientists has noted how underlying variables caused by warmer temperatures — earlier snow melt, drier forests, plants, and soils, unusual rain patterns, and insect outbreaks that increase the number of dead trees — contribute to the greater incidence of wildfires (Union of Concerned Scientists, 2022). The increasing scale and frequency of these events raises not only questions of how to address the causes of climate change but also how to survive its consequences. Government and civil society organizations, including religious communities, are facing the need to provide immediate aid and long-term support.

The response to the Camp Fire spanned a range of secular and religious organizations. For example, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), an entity within the Department of Homeland Security in the US government, moved quickly to send teams to Paradise and surrounding towns. Local community organizations, churches, and other

[1] We wish to thank Haven Horton-Kunce, who served as a research assistant, summarizing relevant primary and secondary sources, contributing to the analysis of the sermon, and reading an earlier draft of this article. We also thank Annalisa Buerke, Neil W. Bernstein, and Marina Peterson for providing exceedingly helpful comments on earlier versions. We wish to express our gratitude, as well, to the anonymous reviewer, whose critical input has strengthened our arguments and analysis. Finally, we are grateful to Amir Ghorbanpour and the rest of the journal's editorial board and staff for their support for this article.

religious groups, often coordinating together through interfaith structures, also reacted. The two types of response soon overlapped. FEMA disaster care managers, for instance, collaborated with local religious groups such as Northern Valley Catholic Social Service to ensure continued support for survivors.[2] These efforts led to the formation of the Long-Term Recovery Group that then renamed itself the Camp Fire Collaborative (CFC). The CFC spanned secular and religious groups, including various business organizations, educational institutions, the Church of Scientology, the Church of Latter-Day Saints, the Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation, Chico Area Interfaith Council, Chico Hillel, Northern Valley Catholic Social Services, and United Methodist Committee on Relief. The organization continues to provide extensive, long-term case management services for survivors, including ongoing access to FEMA resources.

The Camp Fire's consequences, as horrific as they were for Paradise, extended beyond the immediate disaster zone to affect Butte County as a whole. Under provisional evacuation orders during the fire, for example, Chico, Butte's largest city of approximately 92,000 people, found itself becoming the primary refuge for the thousands fleeing the inferno in Paradise and in other surrounding towns. Many of these refugees sought shelter in makeshift structures erected in the parking lots of Walmart and other big box stores on the city's outskirts. Four years after the fire, in 2022, thousands of Camp Fire refugees remain unhoused. This persisting problem has caused divisions in Chico between citizens who want the unsheltered to move on to other locations and groups that advocate for the needs of the unhoused. As such, Chico has become a living example of how climate disaster can worsen existing injustices — the unhoused situation had been growing in the city during the decade prior to the fire — and polarize communities in the aftermath (Anguiano, 2022). Religious groups remain at the forefront in these debates and efforts to support the survivors as the Camp Fire Collective demonstrates.

Of note, the local religious community considered in this research study — Neighborhood Church of Chico, California — is part of the major religious group in the United States most skeptical or doubtful of climate change: White evangelical Protestants (Jones & Cox, 2017; Veldman et al., 2021). While the skepticism of this larger group has persisted over time, a growing generational divide has emerged in which young evangelicals appear more likely than their older counterparts to state that human-caused global warming is happening and to express support for climate-related policies, such as funding renewable

[2] Since 2006, the Department of Homeland Security, which includes FEMA, has stressed the importance of coordinating disaster response with local religious groups. This emphasis reflects the post-9/11 concern with terrorism as well as with FEMA's focus on natural catastrophes. See https://www.fema.gov/emergency-managers/individuals-communities/faith and https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/2020-07/engaging-faith-based-and-community-organizations.pdf.

That FEMA would create an interfaith structure for Chico following the Paradise fire reflects the implementation of this longstanding priority to coordinate with local community organizations. See FAQ 11 for mention of the collaboration between FEMA and Northern Valley Catholic Social Service at https://www.campfire-collaborative.org/disaster-case-manager-faq.

energy research (Lowe et al., 2022). The demographic shift among evangelicals in the United States toward younger and more racially diverse members has also come with increased concern and commitment to climate-related actions, from being effective stewards of God's creation, aiding those in need, and even pressuring church and political leaders to advance climate policies (Stover, 2019). While the Neighborhood Church of Chico congregants' age range is not accessible in the data for this study, the two pastors were in their early to mid-20s at the time of the sermon we analyze below.

2. Guiding questions

Climate-related events will persist inexorably in wreaking havoc. In response, religious groups, which help form the backbone of coalitions like the Camp Fire Collaborative, will continue to shape community actions through the interpretations they give to these events. Examining the reactions of religious leaders to a catastrophe like the Camp Fire might help a range of stakeholders — for example, scholars, educators, policymakers, community organizers, and activists — who work with religious actors and desire to better understand their responses to climate disasters. It might also help reveal ways that groups can work across religious and secular divides to develop shared narratives that can inspire climate action.

We focus on the reactions of one group, the Neighborhood Church of Chico, as a limited case study. We chose this group because of the online public availability of some of the sermons its leaders gave in the immediate aftermath of Paradise's destruction. In our analysis we concentrate in depth on one 29-minute sermon dated to just 10 days after the Camp Fire catastrophe. As such, we do not attend to the more wide-ranging and impactful work of this local faith community, including the efforts of the two pastors to marshal and provide indispensable forms of material and emotional support to community members. We remain grateful and inspired by their commitment. We also hope the findings from our analysis can be viewed as an additional catalyst for conversations across governmental, secular civic, and religious groups about how to frame, understand, and respond to climate-related catastrophes.

One overarching question and three sub-questions guide our analysis:

- How does the pastoral leadership of one Christian church community — the Neighborhood Church — interpret the meaning of a climate-related disaster (the 2018 Camp Fire) that its members and the refugees they are supporting have experienced (directly or indirectly)?
    - Which narratives, symbols, tropes, and authoritative references figure most prominently in their discourse?
    - What actions does this pastoral leadership suggest as responses to the disaster? How do these suggestions relate to its sense-making?
    - What "stories-we-live-by" (Stibbe, 2021) are evident in this sermon?

Drawing on an understanding of religion as crisis response and intervention, we discern

two key religious themes at play in the sermon. The first has to do with the question of suffering (theodicy): why God would allow it and, implicitly, why one must remain faithful in the face of doubts about God's protection and care.[3] The second issue centers on the idea of community and the duties members acquire to extend care and compassion for those in need. An analysis of how this sermon takes up these two issues also points to a cluster of ambivalent stories-we-live-by (Stibbe, 2021): w*e are in this together; together we will make it through;* and c*onfronting challenges can help us become stronger*. These three stories, which flow from how the sermon addresses the underlying religious issues, contain "beneficial story" elements as they point to a common human identity (CHI) beyond the specific Christian theological concerns (Reese, 2016) and emphasize hope and resilience, which remain crucial in responding to the suffering of survivors. Yet, the sermon also excludes an explicit ecological crisis perspective, which, as we will show, results, in part, from how the sermon answers the religious questions at play. It abstains from nodding to causes and consequences of climate change and limits its conception of community to the Church and to Chico and Paradise rather than expanding it to embrace a universal human and trans-species view of all life. These elements suggest a more destructive story-we-live-by because there is no explicit naming of the ecological problem or type of systemic solutions needed to address it.

3. Key concepts: Religion and crisis management

Two key concepts require careful discussion before proceeding with the sermon analysis. The first concept has to do with religion — what it is, in substantive and interpretive terms, and why it becomes relevant to any discussion of crisis situations. The second important concept is the idea of crisis itself. Religion and crisis, as we approach these ideas, become intertwined. We must understand them in relation to one another. This interrelation gains clarity when we view religion as a particular social practice.[4]

We define religion as any system of practice entailing a belief in the existence of superhuman forces (gods, spirits, ancestors, extraordinary powers of all sorts) and the capacity of those forces to impinge on human life by causing but also mitigating severe

[3] The theodicy problem arises most acutely within monotheistic traditions that posit a single, all-powerful, all-knowing deity who protects and responds benevolently to his/her/their faithful followers. Other traditions, such as Buddhism, address suffering differently, seeing it as the consequence of attachment to the ephemeral features of the material world and mortal life. Hindu traditions similarly see it as woven into the cycle of re-death that one seeks to transcend through ascetic practice, philosophical enlightenment, ecstatic devotion (Bhaktism), or acquisition of karmic merit in one's present life. Arguably, however, despite these important differences, suffering remains a central problem, if not the primary one, to which these traditions respond albeit with differing understandings of the causes and solutions.

[4] As an analytical category, religion remains open to wide-ranging and intensive debates in diverse fields. Riesebrodt (2010), Strenski (2006), Pals (2014), and Asad (1993) offer overviews and trenchant criticisms of the many attempts since the 18th century to establish a definition.

crises in the body, society, and nature (Riesebrodt, 2010; Spiro, 1966, 1987).[5] By "crisis," in turn, we mean a crucial transition moment that can have existential or life-course consequences for an individual or a group. How one responds to such moments will determine matters of success and failure, life and death.[6]

Religious systems, in the interpretive, sociological sense we are suggesting, provide means to gain access to and manage superhuman forces for the purposes of shifting crisis moments toward successful resolution, toward new flourishing or, at least, toward the avoidance of catastrophe.[7] These means for crisis prevention and shift include a range of

[5] Our definition reflects an interpretive approach to isolating and clarifying what a religion is as opposed to how it functions for the purpose of some other process. It also departs from approaches that define religion in relation to shared features or resemblances that an observer has specified externally (such as, in Catherine Albanese's terms, the existence of "creed, community, cultus, code"). The virtue of an interpretive approach lies in its clarification of our object of analysis. We specify what something is in terms of its underlying logic or operating presumption as we perceive and describe it. Functionalist and family resemblance definitions, by contrast, postpone or avoid this task of defining the object of analysis. Examples of functionalist definitions include Durkheimian approaches that imagine religion with reference to the mechanisms that generate or strengthen a sense of the social and cohesion with it ("the sacred"); Marxist analyses that cast religion in terms of ideology; and psychoanalytic approaches that speak of religion as a type of collective neurosis. There are also rational-choice approaches that define religion in terms of maximizing economic behavior (cost/benefit calculations of increasing positive benefits and minimizing negative consequences). These various approaches helpfully spotlight the potential secondary effects of religious systems but in the end remain focused on other concerns (i.e., the problems of social solidarity, false consciousness, social dysfunction, and market competition). As a result, they beg the question of what religion is in the first place. A similar problem arises with family resemblance approaches. All sorts of groups feature creeds, ethical codes, community institutions, and ritualized patterns of group behavior (cultus). But what specifically distinguishes a religious group from, say, a charitable organization or a sports club? The virtue of our interpretive approach consists in how it locates religion as an analytically distinguishable cultural system whose practices possess a distinct underlying logic (a distinct subjectively intended meaning as Weber would have said). Riesebrodt (2010 [2007], pp. 1-92) provides an excellent exposition of these points. On subjectively intended meaning, see Weber (1968, pp. 4-22) and Kalberg (2012, pp. 47-62). For examples of family resemblance approaches, see Catherine Albanese (1981) and Smart (1989).

[6] Our definition reflects how the term "crisis" derives from the proto-Indo-European root, *krei*, meaning to sieve or discriminate. Galen and Hippocrates used the Greek variation of this root, *krisis*, to refer to the "turning point" at which a disease either worsens or alleviates.

[7] We wish to emphasize that our definition reflects an interpretive focus on what a religion is as a distinct set of practices that we can observe across cultures and time periods. Religious traditions as formulated by elites can concern themselves with a broad range of things that go well beyond crises per se. We argue, however, that when we shift the angle of vision to practices, then we can begin to see a shared, implicit logic that lies at the basis of what we might wish to call religious. This religious logic turns on the concern for preventing, mitigating, and overcoming crises that exceed routine responses by seeking the intervention of superhuman entities or forces. This definition would include practices that go well beyond the monotheisms. The extent to which a practice entails the "religious premise" (the assumption of the existence of superhuman powers or beings or forces and the ability to communicate with those entities or forces, etc., for purposes of addressing suffering or crisis) is the

liturgical rites — prayers, petitions, processions, pilgrimages, chanting, confession, penitence, and the like — which facilitate communication with and manipulation of the superhuman. Other practices — discursive theological and behavior-regulating (ethical) ones — comment on the nature of these exceptional forces and their relation to crises (sickness, plagues, natural disasters, political collapse, etc.) and elaborate on the requirements for order and behavior that alignment with the gods, spirits, heavens, etc., necessitates (Riesebrodt, 2010 [2007]). Religious responses to crises thus occur on multiple levels: liturgical interventions that attempt to mobilize superhuman forces directly to prevent, mitigate, and end crises; theological-discursive explanations of the superhuman dimension and how and why crises occur; and ethical or behavior-regulating demands requiring obedience to divine commandments or proper alignment with the cosmos, the refusal of which, in religious perspective, results in human suffering. These various practices involve institutions and structures that cohere communities and groups in relation to the gods, spirits, ancestors, forces, etc., the existence of which are presumed within those practices. Religious specialists — priests, magicians, healers, preachers, ritual leaders, etc. — emerge as part of the hierarchies that often constitute these structures. The authority of these figures — in Weberian terms, their "charisma" — resides within the special knowledge and powers they claim as gifts or endowments from the gods.

If the presumption holds that religions focus centrally on managing crises, we should expect that the current anthropogenic climate emergency will spur religious responses as individuals try to explain the resulting disasters, cope with their aftermath, and prepare for future devastation and uncertainty. Religious organizations, as we have seen with the Camp Fire Collaborative, often give immediate material aid in crisis situations. They also offer cognitive and emotional support, providing explanations and access to hope rooted in the belief that powerful extra-human forces exist and impinge on the human world. Their theological and moral explanations and their liturgical resources offer the prospect of salvation if only we repent and restore our relationship with the gods, spirits, etc., or align ourselves properly with cosmic realities, and act accordingly in the world. In the monotheistic context, which is our primary concern in this paper, often this returning to God entails care for others: repentance might require *caritas* (charity), a duty the spirits, forces, etc., demand. Failure to perform this duty can be seen as constituting a cause of catastrophe, irrespective of any emerging positive cosmological possibility (a new heaven

extent to which it counts as "religion" in our terms. Practices of puja and chanting, invoking the Buddha or Boddhisatva, might count as religious if the action involves an assumption that the recipient of the giving (the Buddha or bodhisattvas) has the power to ensure karmic merit, survival of fatal disease or accidents (for example, snakebites or attacks by wild animals), or attainment of worldly security (against the possibility of poverty, starvation, etc.). Elite practitioners (philosophers, theologians) might discount these objectives (of life preservation, security) as "superstition" or "error"; but their negative (normative) judgment does not cancel the observable sociological fact that these practices nevertheless rest on and evince a religious premise (as we have described it). See Riesebrodt (2010 [2007]) for an in-depth and highly cogent exposition of these issues.

and new earth, for example).

Crises, in this sense, represent religious decision points: either we read the signs correctly and respond appropriately to the demands of divine powers or we perish. Crises, that is, offer opportunities for turning back, or returning, toward the gods. In what follows, we explore the implications of this idea as it becomes relevant within the discourse of one Christian community, the Neighborhood Church, following the Paradise fire. We also connect this analysis to an ecolinguistics framework that, we suggest, can help elucidate the potential climate-response consequences of this discourse at this church.

4. Ecolinguistics, common human identity (CHI), and religion

Ecolinguistics pairs linguistic perspectives, frameworks and associated tools with ecological theories and practices to emphasize life-sustaining interactions among all living species and the physical environment (Stibbe, 2021). According to the International Ecolinguistics Association (IEA), the first aim of ecolinguistics "is to develop linguistic theories which see humans not only as part of society, but also as part of the larger ecosystems that life depends on" while the second aim "is to show how linguistics can be used to address key ecological issues, from climate change and biodiversity loss to environmental justice" (IEA, n.d.). A key approach to enacting these aims is to discern "stories-we-live-by" encoded in language, images, and multimedia. Whereas "stories are cognitive structures in the minds of individuals" that affect how people interpret and apprehend the world, "stories-we-live-by are stories in the minds of multiple individuals across a culture" (Stibbe, 2021, p. 6). Of note, these mental models shape our thoughts and actions without us consciously choosing them or being aware that they are just stories. Stories-we-live-by reside between the lines of the texts that envelop us in everyday life, including news reports, advertisements, conversations, weather forecasts, instruction manuals, and textbooks, and they occur across contexts (educational, political, professional, medical, legal, etc.) "without announcing themselves as stories" (Stibbe, 2021, p. 5).

Stories-we-live-by can also be characterized in terms of their orientation to the environment. Stories that value and protect essential ecosystems are beneficial; those that do not are deemed destructive; those that do some of both are considered ambivalent (Stibbe, 2021). Some common examples of destructive stories-we-live-by include narratives that place humans at the center of existence and separate from nature, make consumerism the primary pathway to well-being and happiness, and presume the goal of a society is perpetual economic growth without limits (Damico & Baildon, 2022; Stibbe, 2021). These are destructive stories-we-live-by because ecological damage and devastation are possible, if not likely, when these stories hold sway in society. In turn, some beneficial stories-we-live-by include stories that demand respect, care, and responsibility for all life, especially for our most vulnerable populations and species. They also include stories that posit the primary goal of society to be human, ecological, and planetary well-being — a stance that entails a recognition of limits. Finally, these stories emphasize the necessity of civic or

democratic engagement for the common good (or best interests of larger groups and communities) to achieve just and meaningful lives and futures (Damico & Baildon, 2022).

A common humanity identity (CHI) orientation aligns with a beneficial story framing. CHI builds on social identity theory and self-categorization theory to explain how individuals tend to define and understand themselves based on their bonds to different social groups, such as one's nation, religion, profession, and so on (Reese, 2016). These identity attachments also occur across various levels of inclusion, "from low (i.e., personal identity) and intermediate levels (e.g., family, friends, county, or country) up to the highest or superordinate level of inclusion, which is represented by all humans" (Reese, 2016, p. 523). A CHI orientation, because it expands beyond the low and intermediate levels of identity, can help catalyze the views and corresponding actions conducive to promoting climate or environmental justice.

Religion can shape stories-we-live-by. Consider Christianity and the idea of human exceptionalism encoded in scripture as humans are created in the image of God and given dominion over all creation (Genesis 1: 26-30). More than a half-century ago, historian Lynn White (1967) argued that this central narrative represented unequivocal evidence of Christianity's anthropocentrism because "no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man's purposes" (1967, p. 1205). In this sense, Genesis points to a destructive story-we-live-by, one which grants permission to view nature solely as an extractive resource. However, other perspectives challenge this account to argue that Genesis is a pro-animal story because human and nonhuman animals are created on the same day with both sharing "the breath of life" (Camosy, 2017). Religious texts can serve multiple exegetical purposes, as this example of contending interpretations of the bible shows; and for that reason, any claim about the positive or negative impact of religious discourses must flow from an inquiry into what groups do with their religious narratives in practice.

In sum, religious responses often take the form of stories through which paradigmatic figures exemplify proper attitude and action. Whether these stories conduce toward narratives that are beneficial, destructive, or ambivalent with respect to the environment constitutes an empirical as well as an evaluative question. It is essential to find out how communities are relating these stories to their situations and to evaluate their implications for climate action.

5. The Neighborhood Church: Background

According to the institutional history available on its website, the Neighborhood Church began in 1964 when Reverend Ken Backlund and his wife, Wava, moved from Oakland to Chico. The couple sought to create a new community committed to evangelism in the northern part of the state. Their early efforts, according to the account, generated rapid growth. Envisioning a large campus for an expanded ministry, Backlund and his congregation purchased a 37-acre plot south of Chico. The video recounting this moment

presents the effort as a heroic and miraculous event.[8] Undertaken without much prior planning, Backlund, according to the video, succeeded through faith and prayer in gathering the necessary $45,000 in just a single weekend. The current campus features the extensive Christo Salva ("Christ Saves") geodesic dome, the main worship space, as well as a "Chico Christian Pre-School," the "CORE Butte Charter School," and the "CORE Butte High School." The lead pastor, Andrew Burchett, grew up in the Neighborhood Church community and lives in the adjoining subdivision.

Leaders of the church have received their training at institutions such as Asbury Seminary in Kentucky. In doing so, they, and the church that calls them as leaders, situate themselves within a conservative evangelical milieu. Further, as a member of the Christian and Missionary Alliance (CMA), Neighborhood Church (and its sister church, Paradise Alliance, whose members sought shelter in Chico after the fire) aligns itself with a premillennialist theology. CMA founder Rev. Albert Benjamin Simpson (1881-1919) advocated this viewpoint, which bases itself on a literal interpretation of Revelation 20:1-6, a biblical passage describing Christ's thousand-year reign.[9] Premillennialists believe that Jesus' second coming will inaugurate this reign, which will end with a period of tribulation and the physical rapture (heavenly transport) of the true believers.

Premillennialist beliefs lie at the foundation of climate skepticism among many conservative evangelicals (Veldman, 2019): the idea that Jesus' coming is imminent (an event reliant on God's power and sovereignty) can result in a lack of concern for the existential threat of anthropogenic global warming. (Other evangelical groups, especially younger evangelicals, however, have backed the creation care movement, which advocates for climate action as an expression of biblical values.) Premillennialism also correlates with a primary emphasis on individual piety and prayer and individual conversion. Premillennialists feel urgency to bring as many of their fellow human beings as possible to believe in the way they do (in Jesus, that is, and in the doctrine that this Jesus will come to reign and judge humanity) before the second coming occurs.

Catastrophes, such as the burning down of towns, constitute signs of the "fallen" (sinful) nature of the mortal, created world. They also serve as mysterious signs of God's will for the world (its inevitable end, for example, and the arrival of a new heaven and earth in its place) and tests for believers, who must respond with prayer and recommitment to Jesus. Crises thereby present opportunities to seek and discern God's miraculous favors toward those who remain steadfast in faith — a house saved from the fire, unexpected

[8] For an in-depth discussion of how such narratives function as part of securing religious beliefs in practice, see Luhrmann (2020).

[9] See https://www.canadianchristianleaders.org/leader/albert-b-simpson-2/. One of the belief statements listed on the Neighborhood Church's website states: "The second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ is imminent (32) and will be personal, visible, and premillennial. (33) This is the believer's blessed hope and is a vital truth which is an incentive to holy living and faithful service. (34)." The numbers in brackets are footnotes referring to key biblical passages: that is, [32] Hebrews 10:37, [33] Luke 21:27, [34] Titus 2:11-14. See https://www.ncchico.org/beliefs.

financial help — and to call people to God through demonstration of that same faith. This theological frame excludes material explanations of disasters that derive from climate science and from a corresponding critical evaluation of human behavioral impact on climate processes. For many conservative evangelicals, human behavior gains relevance only with reference to sin (the existential condition of fallenness) and the failure to rely on God, that is, to see and trust God's miraculous acts and grace during crisis. The idea that humans can determine cosmic outcomes appears, in this view, to contradict God's determining power and control over creation's destiny. Salvation requires obedience to and alignment with God's will, not human self-assertion.

6. Method

Given our goal to understand ways religious interpretations conveyed through publicly available discourse (sermons, statements, etc.) were shaping the response to the November 2018 Camp Fire, we made the following methodological decisions: We surveyed the websites and social media feeds of different religious groups in the Chico and Paradise areas. We located one church, the Neighborhood Church, which had posted two sermons given immediately after the Camp Fire. These sermons appeared on the church's publicly available YouTube channel. In this paper, we focus in detail on the sermon from November 18, 2018, just ten days after the conflagration. Of note, this sermon does not conform to the traditional practice of a single clergyperson mounting a pulpit to offer an interpretation or reflection based on the biblical readings of the given Sunday. Instead, it occurred as a staged conversation between two pastors. The sermon, "To Everything There Is a Season," is a 29-minute discussion between Andrew Burchett, Neighborhood Church's lead pastor, and Josh Gallagher, the head pastor of the Neighborhood Church's sister community, Paradise Alliance. (As of July 2022, the YouTube video had received 60 views.)

Our analytical approach emphasized the identification of core themes as we sought to discern how the pastors at the Neighborhood Church framed and interpreted the Paradise fire in relation to biblical texts and concepts. If the fire was a *krisis* (crisis), in the sense of presenting a critical decision point, as well as a perceived *Kairos* moment (the appointed time in which God acts salvifically), then we would expect the sermon to reflect these ideas and to develop them narratively in relation to the biblical context and to implications for action. We emphasize that our analysis derives from a single sermon and therefore its generalizability remains constrained to this narrow sample. Also, the Neighborhood Church's response to the Camp Fire extended well beyond this one instance of public address. Still, what we describe has utility, we argue, as a sketch of preliminary questions and concepts deriving from publicly available religious discourse. Further research, we anticipate, will expand upon, challenge, and deepen these first, tentative findings.

7. Thematic analysis of the sermon: Discourses and stories-we-live-by

7.1. Detailed description

Sermon: To Everything There Is a Season

The video recording of this sermon opens with Andrew Burchett, the lead pastor at Neighborhood Church, acknowledging that songs "challenge us" in moments in which we do not feel as if we can sing them. He is moving toward two stools where Josh Gallagher, the other pastor, a survivor of the Paradise fire (as we will learn later in the sermon), has walked on to stage, and sat down. As he moves toward his stool, Burchett tells his listeners — many of whom have just lost everything in Paradise or have worried that they too would need to evacuate their communities — that the song they have just sung "was written in an incredible moment of loss and grieving." He then transitions to the central theme of the dialog that will take place between him and Gallagher, saying, "and that's the season we are in, we're in a season of grief."

This phrase, "a season of grief," resonates at three levels within this community. It echoes, first, the group's distinct style of discourse, its idiolect. In the church's historical background video (posted on its website), for example, Burchett and others refer to phases of their lives and of their faith journeys as "seasons." The concept of a "season" also evokes nature and its cycles, such as the "fire season," which appears to come and go and come again with increasing degrees of intensity and extent in the western regions of the United States. The final resonance of the phrase involves the passage in Ecclesiastes (3:1-8) that speaks of everything under heaven having a distinct season or moment. This biblical text, which the '60s rock band, The Byrds, rendered into a popular ballad, reads:[10]

> To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven / A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted / A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up / A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance / A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace,

[10] The comment thread in the linked YouTube track relays stories of loss — a father diagnosed with terminal cancer, references to the many deaths during the COVID pandemic — and the comfort and perspective that the song and the biblical text it draws from provided. One person wrote of hearing of his father's terminal diagnosis and amidst his tears turning on the car radio to hear this song. The father's family read the biblical text at the memorial. These stories highlight the cultural role of the Ecclesiastes passage, which speaks to the inconstancy of human experience — of the coming and going of sorrow, joy, conflict, and peace. The biblical passage asserts an underlying divine will and wisdom that remains hidden behind each moment. It also implies that these moments remain limited in duration. Suffering, like joy, lasts only for a time. A tension, explored further below, lies between this view in Ecclesiastes and the reality of permanent detrimental change — as is occurring with climate change and its destructive impact on the very foundations of life.

> and a time to refrain from embracing / A time to get, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away / A time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak / A time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace. (King James Version, KJV)

Pastor Burchett reads the first four lines of this passage — ending with the verse stating there is a time to mourn and a time to dance — as he moves into the key portion of the sermon. Referring to an observation that his co-officiant Josh Gallagher made during an earlier worship service, Burchett asserts that the congregation must come to see "God as a God of 'and'" and not a "God of 'or' — you're either this or this." One "can be really afraid, really struggling with your faith, and at the same time trust God and live in this conflicted place." As he turns and gestures to Gallagher, Burchett concludes, "But it's just a season."

Burchett then moves to the question of how to survive this season. He warns first that his listeners must resist comparing their individual suffering or lack of it to others. He notes the potential for shaming: "You're not crying enough! Why aren't you crying more?!" But even Paradise's survivors might not want or need to cry at this point. Gallagher says, in response to Burchett, "I'm pretty much cried out."

Burchett next recites, from memory, Psalm 23 to explain the season of suffering and how one can move through it with God. The passage reads as follows (KJV):

1. The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.
2. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.
3. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
4. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.
5. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.
6. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

Burchett expands on the passage by asking his listeners to remember or imagine being in a valley with steep walls that limit what one can see. God stays with us as we move through this "valley of the shadow of death," he says, but we also "walk in community." Gallagher had offered this same observation earlier, saying Chico and Paradise were moving through this season of suffering together. Burchett, however, grounds this idea theologically, asserting that community reflects God's nature: the Christian's triune God, he says, has "always walked in community" as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Burchett intends his words about community not only for Paradise's survivors but also for Chico's Neighborhood Church members who might "feel conflicted" because they have not

suffered to the same degree. But "the truth is that we are all grieving," he emphasizes. The community, including those at Neighborhood Church spared from the fire's immediate devastation, suffers together, walks together.

Burchett develops this idea of shared suffering further with reference to Paul's famous metaphor of the Church as the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12). If one part of the body suffers, the entire body suffers, according to Paul. If one celebrates, all celebrate. Each part of the body has a different function; yet the entirety remains unified in recognition of the interdependence and interconnection of each member. Burchett then states that "this is our finest hour, Church; this is our finest hour, Chico and surrounding areas, to walk with our friends up the hill [to the ruins of Paradise and the other burned down communities in Butte County]." The tragedy, Burchett notes, has led to a new sense of interconnection. Religious leaders, pastors, were meeting together in ways not seen for more than 30 years. At this point, one can hear applause from the audience. Responding to the clapping, Burchett's voice rises: "So, God's on the move!" "Sometimes it takes a disaster," Burchett proclaims, "to get people unstuck!" Burchett speaks of seeing "the body of Christ in Chico walking with the body of Christ up the hill" as a manifestation of the connectedness of the Church amid the fire's horrible aftermath. This period will not be easy for Chico, Burchett says, and "if you think this will be another event that's going to go by and it's going to be business as usual, you're crazy." Things will not be normal, Burchett says (though the chaos and suffering might become the 'new normal,' as he claimed earlier).[11]

At this point, Burchett returns to the recognition that the needs of the survivors defy understanding. The needs overwhelm. He tells Paradise Alliance members — a reference to the sister church and its community that the Neighborhood Church is supporting — to remain for a meeting that Gallagher will lead. He asks them to help Burchett and other Neighborhood Church members to identify specific and immediate concerns. "We are the base camp," Burchett says, and its Neighborhood Church's responsibility to welcome groups who want to help and to assist them "to ascend the hill and serve."

Gallagher takes over the discussion at this point, saying that "for many of you, the dance, as I like to call it, has begun." How does one help? How does one say the right thing and avoid saying the wrong thing? To help his listeners, Gallagher invokes the bible yet again. In Job 2:11, he reminds the audience, Job's three friends set out from their homes to visit Job, to sympathize with him, to comfort him. They could not recognize Job. They wept aloud, tore their robes, and sprinkled dust on their heads. In verse 13, they sat on the

[11] This point appears to conflict with the idea of a season that one moves through. A season is time-bound, momentary. Things not returning to "normal," however, connotes a substantive shift in conditions and not a momentary phase. Gallagher resolves this tension toward the end of the sermon with a new metaphor of grief as a wave or tide that progressively ebbs but never entirely goes away. We might extrapolate by observing that just as a tide recontours a beach, taking sand away and depositing new sand elsewhere, so too grief subsides but leaves behind a changed landscape in its wake. Perhaps a season is like a tide in this way. Its intensity will peak and then ease away but the natural world never remains static as it moves through its climatic cycles.

ground with Job for seven days and seven nights, not speaking at all. As Gallagher put it, they "entered into" his grief. Gallagher emphasized further that "the best thing they did was nothing except sit and be; being with people is powerful." In the remainder of the story, Gallagher observes, humorously, things "go downhill" because Job's friends decide "to open their mouths trying to fix [Job's suffering]." Gallagher draws the lesson for his Chico listeners that "if you're trying to walk with somebody through this [the suffering that the Camp Fire has caused], sometimes it's not what you say but what you don't say — just being present is enough." Gallagher then addresses Paradise's survivors: "For some of us that are going through this and can relate more like with Job than his friends, we need to understand this: trust people's intentions." He urges that "during this season" the survivors need to extend "forgiveness, especially for those people who are trying to walk with you."

Burchett then continues Gallagher's point, elaborating on Job's suffering, but once more shifts emphasis, invoking Romans 12 to say, "we are commanded to weep with those who weep." This section of Paul's letter stresses the life of the church, in which "we are to rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn" (Romans 12:15). What does it mean to mourn with others, Burchett asks. First, he says, it means we should not "rush people through grief." Grief demands time for its resolution. We cannot hurry it. Second, we should not "change the subject too quickly" when someone is expressing their suffering through tears or in other ways. Americans, he says, are prone to move quickly past such moments to point out solutions or the possibility of a better day coming. Burchett urges, instead, an openness to "holy lingering" — a moment and attitude in which one restrains one's tongue and instead listens and allows the other person to speak. Burchett refers to people who have come from other California counties that have experienced disasters to help with the Neighborhood Church's relief efforts. They have told him, he says, "to warn the people" not to "spiritualize what has happened." He gives the example of someone claiming to have prayed vigorously and as a result his house is still standing unscathed despite the surrounding destruction. Burchett's unstated point, among other interpretations, appears to be that the implicit criticism — that one was not sufficiently faithful (did not pray hard enough or with enough trust) and therefore deserves the suffering that has come — has the potential to alienate Paradise's survivors and undermine community bonds in this moment of crisis and need.

So, what does love and support look like, positively, in this moment? Beyond simply showing up and being present, what concrete actions can we take? Burchett notes an immediate problem when trying to extend help: when we ask people about what they need, the answer might be, "nothing" because so often "we don't know what we want." He suggests a different approach: concrete suggestion. Offer to buy the person a cup of coffee or to do his laundry or get him a new bible. One might also "pray for the person as if they are your friend. Ask God to do specific things for them." "Specificity in these moments,"

he says, "is what love looks like."[12] Gallagher concurs with this advice and counsels the audience to listen to their inner urgings: "If something specific is on your heart, pray it." General prayers are fine, he says; but specificity has more power — "it goes a long way." Gallagher never explains why this might be so; but Burchett's point about offering specific help — a new bible, a cup of coffee — offers a clue: specificity implies a level of intention, commitment, and action that a general offer to help does not.[13]

Gallagher, at this point, transitions into the concluding segment of the sermon. He asks his listeners to imagine standing on a shore looking out at the ocean. "Grief," he says, "is a lot like the tide and the waves." Right now, we are at high tide with high waves. Grief floods over us but we should not fight or resist the deluge. Resisting grief, he implies, leads to exhaustion and fear. Instead, we should "ride the wave of grief." If we do so, we will experience the ebbing of the tide. "Every single time," Gallagher says, "the wave will go back out." Gallagher relates how he had woken up that morning and had his first real "new normal" moment. He thought to himself that he could not have just lost his home and that his church had scattered. He looked over and saw his children sleeping on couches and beds next to him. He realized he was truly in the middle of the turmoil. "In that moment," he recalls, "the wave of grief hit me hard." Rather than running from it, however, by telling himself that he was going to have a wonderful day with Burchett at Neighborhood Church, he instead prayed to God, acknowledging that "this is going to be hard." As he did so, "the wave went back out." More waves will come, he says. As each wave hits, though, the tide recedes, and the impact of the successive inundations diminishes.

Still, we will continue to feel the water if only softly "on our toes" since we cannot undo what has happened. "A part of our story now," Gallagher says, "is what occurred [to Paradise]." This is "the new normal." As we go through this process, we cannot obsess about the next possible wave. Rather, we "have to look up" in hope. In those moments, with the waves rising, we must focus on something other than the coming grief. We need to "choose hope" in a God "who understands our situation, a God who wants to enter into this season with us." He urges the audience to remember that "the greatest tragedy that ever happened in the course of humanity was when Jesus, God's son, suffered and died. Greatest tragedy. Nothing compares." Gallagher notes, however, that this greatest of

[12] The black theologian and activist, Cornel West often says that social and political justice is what love looks like in public. West and Burchett share a concern with practical actions that address suffering. But West's concern, far more than Burchett's, is with structural inequities that generate injustice from one generation to the next. Burchett's horizon remains much more limited: he constrains his focus to the individual and to individual charity. He and Gallagher do not mention climate change. They do not mention how the residents of Paradise came from the lower middle class. These individuals were in Paradise because it remained one of the few communities in which one might, if poor or working class, still be able to buy a home, albeit a prefabricated one (a "trailer home").

[13] For example, setting a date and time with someone for a meeting differs from a general (and perhaps inauthentic) statement about how "we should get together sometime" (a common phrase that many US Americans often employ as a linguistic/pragmatic strategy to affirm connection while simultaneously avoid commitment).

all tragedies, as he puts it, was also the greatest of all victories. Jesus came back from the dead. The church, too, has experienced this truth: in moments of crisis, it thrives and flourishes. We have seen this repeatedly, Gallagher says. Gallagher here raises the problem of theodicy (why suffering comes to the faithful even though God remains all-powerful, all-knowing, and beneficent): "God works even when we don't understand it." We suffer. We do not know why. Yet God transforms this suffering, sustaining life, overcoming death. We may not see how this divine purpose is unfolding; but we need to trust that it is operating. Hope consists in this act of trust. Hope, too, comes in waves, Gallagher notes. We must hold on to it as each flood of grief arrives.

Gallagher's comments conclude the sermon. Burchett asks the listeners to stand. Burchett then invites Gallagher to close with a prayer. Gallagher, standing with hands in his jeans pockets, bows his head, closes his eyes, and says:

> God, thank you that we have brothers and sisters who are willing to weep with us when we weep and mourn with us when we mourn.
>
> God, help us all to grieve well during this season, saying thank you, this isn't the end, but it is a season we are all walking through together. We believe that in this season you are preparing your church for a mighty work, and you have already been working in obvious ways. Thank you that we get to be a part of it.
>
> But, God, I also pray boldly now in faith that we will have a season in your timing that we're going to laugh with those who will laugh, and we *will* be rejoicing with those who rejoice because of what you have done. We don't know when or what that will look like; but we pray in faith that it is coming because you are alive. We do have hope, and because of you, Jesus, even the uncertainty of today and tomorrow and of the next day we can still find encouragement through you.
>
> So, God, help us to weep with those who weep, help us to mourn with those who mourn, as we follow you into this next season. It's in Jesus' name that we pray. Amen.

7.2. Analysis

Stepping back from the close description of the Burchett/Gallagher sermon, we can discern two key theological issues that reflect an understanding of religion as crisis response and intervention. The first has to do with the question of suffering (theodicy): why God would allow it and, implicitly, why one must and can remain faithful in the face of doubts about God's protection and care. The second issue centers on the idea of community and the duties members possess to provide care and compassion to those who suffer. An analysis of how the sermon addresses these two issues also points to a cluster of ambivalent stories-we-live-by: *we are in this together; together we will make it through;* and c*onfronting challenges*

can help us become stronger.

7.2.1. The question of suffering

For a religious community that presumes God's power over all things and God's beneficence toward faithful, devout believers, disasters such as the Camp Fire constitute a direct challenge to the promises made on behalf of the divine (and, correspondingly, as reasons for converting or for maintaining one's faith). Such a religious community, therefore, must address the question of suffering to maintain the credibility of its god and of its claims about the power and benefits of believing and seeking the protection and care of the divine. In this sense, climate change, to the extent it generates immense suffering (and, indeed, the threat of species annihilation) for humans, undermines the believability and coherence of religions operating on these premises (of a loving, responsive, and omnipotent deity).

The Burchett/Gallagher dialog sermon implements two discursive strategies that religious communities (specifically monotheistic ones) might adopt to respond to this problem of believability that suffering creates. The first accounts for suffering's existence, surprisingly placing the onus for it on God rather than humans. In the perspective that Burchett and Gallagher offer, suffering exists because it forms part of the "fallen" condition of the post-paradisal creation. As Ecclesiastes implies, God has created a world in which joy, sorrow, peace, war, love, hatred, sowing, and harvesting alternate in rotation. The Camp Fire and other disasters signal a season of pain and loss. This idea of suffering as a season subtly shifts the explanation of evil away from human failing and fallenness (sin). Suffering appears, instead, as an inevitable, "hardwired" part of a fallen world that includes the human but extends beyond it. God has made humans, it seems, to feel loss and pain. This condition makes humans aware of their helplessness and need for salvation. It becomes thereby a means to grace and redemption if humans heed the signs that suffering constitutes. One insight that comes with this awareness that suffering can catalyze is that God extends mercy by limiting suffering's duration (to an indeterminate season). We suffer for a time — just long enough to be shaken from our arrogance, lethargy, and forgetting to remember God and seek God's saving aid.

Burchett and Gallagher, to be clear, do not state these points explicitly. Instead, these issues remain as subtext within this discursive strategy of shifting the onus for suffering away from direct human responsibility. We cannot dispute God's will, which allows but also responds to our fallen condition and which serves a redemptive intention; but we can take comfort that suffering will pass because "it's just a season." The absence of any mention of human-caused climate change — of human responsibility for this situation — and its direct link to an event like the Camp Fire stands out, from the viewpoint of our climate-oriented concern, in this formulation.

The second discursive strategy is to point to suffering's unexpected benefits: it allows God to create new possibilities, new life, and new blessings. Burchett urges his listeners to

see the signs of God working in the Camp Fire tragedy, especially in the strengthening of the church. Hearkening implicitly to Tertullian's idea that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church (Tertullian, 1999), Burchett points to examples of Neighborhood Church volunteers walking "up the hill" to Paradise and pastors from across the denominational spectrum gathering in ways not seen in decades.

Burchett reminds his listeners that God sometimes must use disaster and suffering "to get people unstuck." This getting stuck, however, has less to do with human impact on the climate than with lack of cohesion within the church. Disaster and suffering comprise blessings because they provoke needed change within the church and among believers in their individual lives. As Gallagher says in his ending prayer, God is preparing the church for "a mighty work" even if his followers, amid their pain, might not yet see this purpose. The incipient unity among church leaders that the disaster has provoked constitutes a sign of this "mighty work" and of the new heaven and earth that premillennialist believers predict will occur because of the apocalyptic unveiling. Fires and suffering indicate the arrival of this moment. In coming together to bind up the wounds of survivors, the church, like Job, who prays for his tormentors, prefigures the millennium of peace that will come at the end of the suffering that the apocalyptic moment must inevitably produce. Whatever the mighty work is, then, it lies partly in this prefiguring, prophetic role which steadfastly and even joyfully embraces suffering.

At the same time, however, Burchett (in a part of the sermon not described above) stresses that one must refrain from making this point to victims in a chiding manner. One should not, for example, quote Romans 5 and 8 and James 1 — which stress that God makes all things work toward his purposes for those who have faith and rejoice in their suffering — at survivors. Victims may not be able to hear such words in the given moment. Instead, the one seeking to help must become the quiet instrument of God, providing specific aid to those in need. One can become the sign of God's blessing, the sign of new possibility, in this way. Burchett and Gallagher's stress on disaster as opportunity for new beginning reflects a well-established theme in the bible. God creates and destroys repeatedly: Noah's flood, a story describing the decimation and recreation of life, as well as the story of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection stand as paradigmatic examples of this theme.

7.2.2. Community and the duties of care and compassion

The second main problem, in addition to the origins and purpose of suffering, that the Burchett/Gallagher sermon addresses relates to community and the duties of care and compassion. Here, the discursive emphasis shifts to individual actions and their potential to build or undermine church unity. We might think of the Burchett/Gallagher performance on stage as a demonstration of the desired unity even as the discussion between them probes what retaining that unity requires. Burchett represents the Chico community while Gallagher comes from Paradise as a survivor who has sought refuge in

Chico. The two men lead churches — Neighborhood Church and Paradise Alliance — which share membership in the Christian and Missionary Alliance organization (described earlier). Members of the Paradise Alliance community sheltered at Neighborhood Church after the fire. The sermon addresses an audience comprising the two groups. Thrown together by circumstance, they must find a way to unify as they grapple with the uncomfortable roles they discover themselves in. Chico residents remain unscathed. They retain their property. Paradise survivors, by stark contrast, have lost everything — homes, money, food, clothing, community. The status and power difference inherent in these roles can generate resentments and divisions. The question, then, of how to give effective and sensitive aid and how to receive that aid graciously becomes important to address if this thrown-together group is to cohere and function. Three main points bearing on this problem emerged in the dialog between Burchett and Gallagher. They included the following:

- **We suffer together — the church, the town, everyone — and we therefore have a responsibility for mutual care.** The Camp Fire has affected not only Paradise but also Chico. We must come together, and we must see ourselves in one another in the way Paul describes through his metaphor of the church as a single body. We share the same fate even if the fire has not affected us in the same ways. Paradise residents have lost everything; but Chico community members feel pain and sorrow, too. Burchett spends considerable time in the early part of the dialog describing the awkwardness that many Chico residents are experiencing as they struggle to help. The central problem, as he describes it, consists of offering that help without alienating the one you seek to assist. Facile references to scripture or tone-deaf cheeriness will cause resentment. General offers of assistance will appear meaningless or put a survivor in the uncomfortable position of suggesting (and therefore asking for) forms of help. Both situations — pollyannish statements and inauthentic offers of assistance — create tension and a potential for undermining connection (and church unity).

- **Preserving unity (and securing God's blessing) requires presence, silence, listening, and specific forms of help (concrete items, particularized prayers).** Burchett and Gallagher provide specific guidance to their listeners about what constitutes effective and ineffective modes of assistance to those who are suffering. They invoke the example of Job and his friends. They note the importance of the presence ("showing up"), silence, and listening that Job's friends exemplify in their initial approach to Job. They also note how these friends then undermine the positive impact of their supportive stance when they start talking at Job, accusing him and God of failings, and incurring God's anger in response. Burchett then speaks in practical terms about the importance of specificity in extensions of aid. Give concrete things — a meal, laundry, a bible. Be ready, too, to be "the base

camp," directing specific aid "up the hill" toward those who need it. Specific aid and the readiness to act remove the onus of determining the forms of help from the victim. One gives without asking the victim to specify, uncomfortably, what she or he needs. Gallagher also stresses specificity in prayer. Specificity in prayer entails attention and intention toward the one prayed for, and it often comes at a direct prompting from God. One must honor it and pray this prompting. Through prayerful specificity and the readiness to act, tension, resentment, and shame can dissipate, allowing connection and church unity to emerge. Burchett and Gallagher, to be clear, do not draw this conclusion in explicit terms; but they imply it through their concern to guide their listeners toward actions that reduce guilt and awkwardness in the encounter between helper and survivor.

- **The forgiveness of survivors can preserve the unity of the community.** Burchett and Gallagher stress the importance of not only sensitive, specific help but also of extending forgiveness. Victims need to see the underlying good intention within clumsy offers of aid and ill-chosen words. They must be like Job, who prays for those who slander him. And, like Job, if they forgive in this way, they might also receive a reversal of their misfortune as a reward from God. Victims thus represent a crucial factor in maintaining the integrity of communal bonds. If they forgive, they can help prevent alienation, awkwardness, anger, and recrimination. If they forgive, they can become the cause of divine blessing and the reversal of suffering.

8. Ambivalent stories-we-live-by

These religiously oriented themes — i.e., the question of suffering and community care and compassion (including forgiveness) — suggest, from an ecolinguistics standpoint, ambivalent stories-we-live-by. Such stories combine beneficial and destructive elements. In the sermon, beneficial story elements appear in those themes that point to the potential of a common human identity (CHI) orientation (Reese, 2016) and to the possibility of hope and resilience for those who survive. The sermon expresses these elements through such stories-we-live-by as "*we are in this together*; *together we will make it through*" and "c*onfronting challenges can help us become stronger*." However, the absence of any reference to climate change — and human responsibility for it — represents, from our climate-oriented standpoint, less beneficial and even destructive story elements within the sermon. This ambivalent oscillation between beneficial and destructive possibilities appears across four broad emphases that go beyond the sermon's specific religious concerns. These emphases include community, hope, blessing, and solidarity.

8.1. Community

A clear example of how the pastors talked about community points to a beneficial story-

we-live-by. While discussing the ways grief and suffering comprise seasons and the impossibility of placing "a date on when the grieving process will be done," the pastors discuss how the communities of Chico and Paradise have entered this season "as a community … not just the people who have lost their homes but all of us." Seeing the aftermath of the fire as a shared struggle, in which members of Neighborhood Church, Paradise Alliance, and the citizens of both towns work together through this difficult "season," has the potential to generate a beneficial story-to-live-by.

Yet, the exclusion of an explicit ecological crisis perspective along with the absence of a more inclusive conception of what constitutes a, or "the," community suggest aspects of a more destructive story-we-live-by. Not naming the ecological problem prevents the search for systemic solutions needed to address it. Further, the narrowing of community to the church or town prevents awareness of climate change as an existential crisis affecting all humans, Christian and non-Christian, and, indeed, all sentient life. The potential to move from the disaster in Paradise to a global awareness and sense of solidarity with other victims of climate disasters remains unfulfilled within the discursive parameters of this sermon — which, understandably, focuses on addressing the immediate suffering of survivors and their supporters in Chico.

8.2. Hope

Another manifestation of a more beneficial story emerges in how the pastors communicated a stance and commitment to resilient hope that the community can "make it through" this catastrophic event. Consider the conclusion of the sermon when Pastor Gallagher says that congregants need to "choose hope." This hope rests in an understanding God who "wants to enter this season with us." Gallagher also suggests the possibility of victory through tragedy, citing as an example the "greatest tragedy" when "Jesus, God's son, suffered and died."

Hope provides a psychological foundation and perspective shown to be a useful approach to address the existential climate threat. Appealing to despair, cynicism, or nihilism about the current global climate solution proves a less effective catalyst for essential climate action. Yet, concerns arise with an emphasis on "making it through." For example, a story that casts the Camp Fire as a momentary season allows listeners to hope for a return to equilibrium even if the scars of loss will remain ("a new normal"). But what if this "season" persists and intensifies? What if there is no return to equilibrium? What if the tide of suffering never recedes but keeps inundating us with ever increasing force?

One might believe that the cascading disasters of climate change signal the arrival of the end time and the new heaven and earth that God has promised. One can place one's hope in God's sovereign will and control of events and the promise that in the end the believers will receive redemption and new life (just like Job). But do humans retain any responsibility for the impact of their actions on nature? Might repentance not entail a God-given duty to help the world regenerate (heal)? This underlying matter of responsibility

presses up against the emphasis on fallenness and divine necessity and sovereignty within the sermon's discourse. That it goes unaddressed, at least in this specific instance, points to the discourse's ambivalence and its destructive potential even as its stress on God's will and saving power might offer hope, too.

In the aftermath of disasters, the immediate need remains extending aid and comfort to the survivors. But acceptance of suffering as a given (by God or by the fact of human frailty) with a promise of its eventual easing and ultimate redemption leaves unaddressed the realities that climate science has made apparent. At best, we are left with an ambivalent story here. The metaphor of a "season" offers comfort and a perspective that alleviates guilt through a recognition of natural disasters as divine portents of new possibilities or simply as the way the world is (as Ecclesiastes implies). But this same metaphor and perspective also unwittingly suppresses the insistent facts of climate change and the necessity to take responsibility for the climate emergency and to act to mitigate its unrelenting effects as much as possible.

8.3. Blessing

A less ambivalent story emerges when Burchett and Gallagher introduce the idea that suffering generates the possibility of blessing. Positively, this narrative line offers purpose and hope beyond the immediate experience of loss. It also directs our attention to human actions. Disaster corrects us, gets us unstuck, or, as in the story of Noah's flood, wipes away human corruption and violence so that life might begin anew.

Yet Burchett and Gallagher never draw a connection between being stuck and human impact on the climate. They never link such anthropogenic impact to the catastrophic environmental "corrections" that then occur through monstrous floods and fires. The story they tell about suffering and new beginnings remains ambivalent from a climate action perspective for that reason.

But, unlike the "season" metaphor, which urges acceptance of suffering as God-given, this idea that suffering corrects human stuckness has the potential to generate self-criticism leading to positive insight into human responsibility for climate change. This insight can then generate change. And with change can come blessing — as when Job, at God's urging, prays for his detractors and in return receives from God new prosperity.

8.4. Solidarity

Finally, the concern for forging and preserving church unity in the face of disaster continues the ambivalence of the season and crisis-as-blessing metaphors. The sermon's focus on how to give and receive aid reflects a problem that confronts any community that must grapple with disaster: how to prevent resentment and division. The potential for division — as the debates surrounding the 9/11 victims' compensation fund demonstrated — remains a very real possibility. The sermon's stress on specificity, initiative, intention,

and forgiveness guides listeners toward an ethos that can blunt resentments and maintain community as a priority in the minds of individuals within the makeshift Neighborhood Church–Paradise Alliance group. Resilience in the face of disaster requires this spirit of solidarity. In this sense, the Burchett/Gallagher sermon demonstrates the potential of religious discourses to reinforce the capacity of communities to survive climate change.

At the same time, however, the sermon remains focused on acts of charity and individual prayer. Neither the necessity to mitigate human climate impacts at a systemic level nor the need to conceive of solidarity as extending beyond the local community and church (and, indeed, beyond the human to include all living beings) has yet emerged in this discourse. For that reason, the sermon remains an example of an ambivalent story to live by.

9. Conclusion

This paper's analysis focuses on just one 29-minute sermon. We fully recognize the Neighborhood Church of Chico responded much more comprehensively in the aftermath of the Camp Fire in 2018. The church, through the leadership of these two pastors, extended indispensable material forms of aid and provided emotional support to survivors. Still, the findings from our analysis remain instructive. Distilling core religious themes in sermons comprises a crucial step toward understanding discourses or frames at play in these performative, public texts that emerge in the wake of climate-related disasters.

We need to understand these religious discourses on their own terms. This task requires close readings that attend to the specific narratives (biblical, Quranic, etc.) carried within different communities. As crisis management systems, religions provide second-order explanations of suffering (often through theodicy discourses). These same systems also offer techniques (prayers, worship, repentance, the practice of charity, etc.) for intervening directly to prevent, mitigate, and overcome disasters and other causes of suffering that exceed routine responses. Comprehending the underlying premises of these systems — seeing them as ways of responding to crises through the activation of superhuman forces — provides a starting point for appreciating what religions offer to practitioners and communities facing existential threats.

The ecolinguistics frame we apply allows us, further, to identify how religious narratives might align with other kinds of storytelling that similarly fall along the beneficial, ambivalent, and destructive spectrum. This insight reveals which religious narratives can conduce toward positive action on the climate emergency and which are less helpful or even opposed. It also illuminates potential intersections across groups and communities: discourses supportive of climate action might appear to intersect, an insight that can inform cross-group learning and dialog. Points of intersection across ambivalent and destructive narratives might also become apparent. The inclusion of religious discourse, in this analytical process, will thus deepen and enrich understanding of the premises and implications for climate actions of the stories we live by across the board.

We believe it is essential to seek and pursue as much common ground as possible across the diverse ways communities frame and understand the global climate crisis. This includes religious communities, like the Neighborhood Church of Chico, which do not necessarily view crisis moments through an ecological or environmental justice lens in the first instance. As we have seen, the storytelling of the Neighborhood Church pastors remains ambivalent. They may not have mentioned climate change at all; but the ways they stressed the importance of being in solidarity with suffering, prioritized hope during severe challenges, and advocated taking responsibility for the well-being of others in their communities reflected beneficial stories to embrace and live by.

Yet, if a broader goal is to mitigate the impact of future climate-related emergencies, a clearer commitment to naming and addressing these types of climate-related events as human-generated ecological crises is necessary. Such a commitment would also lead to practices that seek systematic solutions to this crisis. This broader goal dovetails with a more inclusive understanding of solidarity, one which transcends the local community (church, town) as well as any configuration of interrelationship that excludes non-believers or does not make it clear that non-believers are part of this community. The more that distinct, even oppositional, communities can embrace a common human identity (CHI) orientation, the more likely needed climate action can take place across community boundaries. More research can help us collectively move in this direction. We might study the potential limits of non-religious responses as compared with the affordances of religious ones, for example; or we might examine how religious organizations and agencies can forge shared narratives and substantive collaborations with non-religious communities on climate change concerns.

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