Transcript ecoChristian Swap Oct 2026

Rev. Nicole Diroff: Hello podcast friends, and welcome to a special off-season episode of *Climate Changed*. I'm Reverend Nicole Diroff, Associate Director at The BTS Center. As we continue to share a few of our favorite podcast swaps this fall, we are thrilled to feature the *EcoChristian* podcast. Hosted by our close colleague Reverend Caleb Cray Haynes, *EcoChristian* explores how the Bible, theology, and the church relate to nature, climate, and caring for the earth.

In today's episode, Caleb sits down with author, Presbyterian pastor, and speaker Courtney Ellis. You may know Courtney from her own wonderful podcast, *The Thing with Feathers*, where she explores the intersection of birds, faith, and hope. What makes Courtney such a perfect fit for our *Climate Changed* community is her posture towards the natural world. She doesn't approach ecology as some sort of detached expert, but rather as a person of faith practicing deep spiritual attentiveness to the creatures right outside her window.

In this conversation, she discusses her newest book, *Weathering Change*, alongside Caleb's recent book, *Earthbound Christian*. By observing how the more-than-human world adapts to transition—from the resilience of migrating birds to the mystery of deep-sea rays—Courtney invites us to see our own human limits and seasons of transition as a feature of God's design. Her reflections on curiosity, grief, and finding joy in our local biomes beautifully echo our work in Season Four of *Climate Changed*, particularly our conversation with Reverend Katie Mears on the messy, holy work of practical adaptation. It is a tender, honest conversation about finding our right size and flourishing within limits.

One more thing before we jump into the episode: I want to share that we have officially begun recording Season 5 of *Climate Changed*. Next season, my co-host Autumn Brown will speak with well-known climate change communicators alongside incredible folks doing significant work on the ground who you may or may not have heard about yet. We cannot wait to share these discussions with you. In the meantime, if you are new to our community, I encourage you to go back and listen to our recently completed Season Four, where we explore world-building through spiritual imagination, grief work, and honoring our ancestors. I hope you enjoy this rich conversation from the *EcoChristian* podcast.

Caleb Cray Haynes: Tell me a bit more about how you got to this book, *The Thing with Feathers*, compared to maybe some of your other work.

Courtney Ellis: I always tell people I'm not an expert. I'm not an ornithologist, I'm not an ecologist, and I don't have any degrees in this. I'm just an enthusiast, and I love books. I think we learn different things about the natural world by studying it, but we also learn different things by loving it, observing it, and living with it. The book came to me, as most of my books have, as a book I really wanted to read that didn't exist. So, I write the books that I want to read that don't exist. I have always been a person who struggled with change. I don't handle change well. I don't like change, I don't seek change, I fear change, and I fight change. I have memories of

being a three- or four-year-old girl and having my dad sit me down and say, "Courtney, you have to learn how to hit the curveball." I thought, "I'm four. Sports metaphors don't work for me, Dad." But I knew what he was saying. Any change in the routine was hard.

The writing of the book was a real crucible of having to face down some of my own struggles and fears. I'm 43—I'm a few years ahead of you—and all the dashboard lights start blinking at once around the time you turn 40. It's like, "Y'all take your turn! Why is everything malfunctioning at once?" So, I was trying to seek out a theology of healthy change. How do we weather change well? And how can witnessing the many ways the natural world copes with change, understands change, and undertakes change help us manage it in our own lives?

Caleb, I was so excited to come across your book because I think our books came out on the same day just a few months ago. I was on social media on my book launch day, looking around, and I realized, "Oh wait, this is a book I need to get my hands on." It is just right for the time that we're living in. That tagline of "flourishing within limits in the age of infinite growth" makes you every businessman's nightmare, but this is what we need to talk about. This idea that God-given limits are a good thing—how did this book come to you?

Caleb Cray Haynes: That's a great question. I see what you did there; you just threw it right back! Doing this work of philosophically and theologically excavating our environmental age—whether you want to call it the Anthropocene, climate change, or whatever—involves digging. Eventually, if you dig long enough, you realize that the bottom layers of all these environmental crises and what's going on within God's creation today are ultimately about how we've gone to battle against God's design. We have waged war on limits and never really stopped to consider that these limits are here not just for our good, but actually for our flourishing. You could track that all the way back to Genesis. We've always assumed that we could consume anything we want, eat from whatever tree in the garden we want, and that there wouldn't be any consequences.

You get into a lot in the book, too. You mentioned "every businessman's nightmare," and that is true. Once you go down that rabbit hole, you realize this has to do with everything from our need to make sure we've got mascara on before we leave the house, to capitalism, the way we've structured our economy, the way we commute to work, and the way we're so darn busy. You really begin unraveling the edges of all this. There's so much there that I really enjoy writing about. That was something I found refreshing about your work, because you approach it in your own way. I don't write a lot about change in my book the way that you grab it, and I thought it was a helpful framework how you break it into four parts: preparation, curiosity, adaptability, and resilience. Does that framework feel accurate to you?

Courtney Ellis: For sure. I think the one that was most surprising to me as I was studying and researching—which is my favorite part of writing, just taking down a whole shelf of library books about trees or seahorses—was discovering what a big part curiosity plays in experiencing change in the natural world. We talk a lot about adaptation, resilience, and preparation—like the squirrel putting away acorns for the winter. But think about curiosity when faced with something

new or different, whether it's a migrating bird or a crow in your backyard that just tipped over the trash can. Animals are inherently curious.

There's a gentleness to curiosity. So often when we experience change, we get caught up in our fight, flight, freeze, or fawn responses. But when we approach change with curiosity, it allows us to be gentle with ourselves and others. It makes space for experiencing change in a way that is a little slower and softer, so we can find our way in. We often struggle with that. We jump first to judgment—"This should be easier for me, why am I struggling with this?"—or we just jump onto the next thing. Curiosity allows us this gracious space to ask, "What am I feeling, and how is this sitting with me?"

As we learn to do that with ourselves, we can learn to do it with one another. You have these great scenes in your book. One that stood out to me was when you're at a friend's house for dinner, and they're washing dishes and keep letting the water run. You're having this ethical conundrum of, "I don't want to be that guy. I don't want to say something, but I'm dying here. I see the oceans being drained and the reservoirs going dry." Learning to offer gentle, curious questions rather than questions of judgment when it comes to environmental concerns is something I'm seeking to grow in personally, and teach my congregation to practice. Change is hard. If there are ways we can make it a little gentler on ourselves and others—including making positive environmental changes—we should. If you judge someone, they shut down. But when you have a relationship and find gentle ways in, suddenly there's a conversation and the possibility of non-resentful change.

Caleb Cray Haynes: Absolutely. One of the reasons environmental work feels like an uphill climb is because we have every right to use words like "emergency," "alarm," or "very urgent." But that inherently comes with a bit of abrasiveness. What does it mean to hold these two postures together with the people around us? Knowing that the "911-ness" we feel we need to approach environmental care with isn't going to create change; it's only going to swing the opposite way. In the first chapter, I write about how we find everything people love and then tell them how it's bad for creation. It's like, "You love football? Well, sucks to be you, because it's an environmental catastrophe." Of course, folks are not going to find their way in like that.

Courtney Ellis: We need to lead with kindness and tenderness, and not assume people are where you think they are or going through what you think they might be going through. Once people understand that you're there with them, there's this wonderful openness to say, "Yeah, this is hard. So where is God? How is God speaking to us, and how is God leading us?" Since change is constant, there must be something important about it, or God wouldn't drag us through it so often. Where is the goodness of change? There's no growth without change.

But it's tricky. Eventually, we can't absorb change when it comes too hard and too fast. That's what we're seeing with the climate and the environment. Migratory birds can adjust their migration window by a day or two, but they can't adjust it by three weeks. They don't have the body fat content or diet to make that happen. When is change too much? We can all be pushed to that point. Your book tries to address this: we are not limitless. I'm going to read an excerpt

from your chapter "Coffee, Curtains, and the Human Condition." I have underlined things all over this book! You write: "Our very lives have become an open pit mining operation. Our data is mined, our time is mined, our resources are mined. But worse than that, our very spirits are mined. Our humanity is mined. We are trapped in a slave system whose business is to keep us content and climbing for more, so that we become clueless to our own capture, exploitation, and slavery." I love the way your book highlights what is being done to us, but also what we are doing to ourselves. We're complicit in our own enslavement. You encourage taking a step back to evaluate where we are at. What kind of reception have you gotten to these ideas?

Caleb Cray Haynes: It's all still really fresh, but I think there is an incredible hunger for folks to connect on the human level. We're always navigating temptations to save face and put on a good show. Within communities, people are starving to show up within the reality that is a sometimes painful, changing, wrinkling, aging life. You were talking to church groups where people are just busy taking kids to soccer practice and doing all the things. These are the days and hours that make up a life. If we show up and say, "Okay, now you have to do even more overcoming, transcending, and climbing in order to lock arms and save the planet," it's overwhelming. What if instead, it's the other direction? What if this has less to do with climbing and more to do with descending back down to the ground?

I feel like there hasn't been good language for that, especially in the church. We don't have good language for what we're craving, but we know it has something to do with authenticity, vulnerability, transparency, and honesty. It's disappointing that we still can't get there in many local church settings. This is what I love about Richard Rohr's book *Breathing Under Water* regarding the 12 steps. Groups like AA have really grabbed this by the tail. How could the church get in on this level of sinking down into our humanity with one another? Humanity is bestowed upon us as a gift. It is actually part of the design, and that's a flip switch: realizing this is part of the beauty.

Courtney Ellis: It's a feature, not a bug, right? We treat aging and change like they're bugs, but these things are God-given.

Caleb Cray Haynes: Absolutely. There's theology there you could spend a lot of time on, but at the end of the day, you can see it all over the natural world. That's one of the things I really love about your work—you have such great observations of the animal kingdom.

Rev. Nicole Diroff: Hello again, friends. It's me, Nicole Diroff. You are listening to a special off-season episode of *Climate Changed*. As we spend this time swapping episodes with shows we deeply admire, we would love to hear from you. If you have a favorite podcast that you want to share with us, please feel free to reach out to me. You can email podcast@thebtscenter.org or leave a voice message at 207-200-6986. You can also find full-length video episodes and bonus clips on The BTS Center's YouTube channel. And as always, visit climatechangedpodcast.org for our transcripts and discussion guides. Now let's get back to the conversation.

Caleb Cray Haynes: I remember you writing about the mobula ray and all the cool features of God's creation. Really good stuff.

Courtney Ellis: I learned so much researching these books. What I love about mobula rays is that we know so little about them. Documentaries like *Blue Planet* and *National Geographic* specials essentially come to the end of themselves and admit they don't know much else because the rays disappear into the bowels of the ocean. We know they give birth to live young, but they're not mammals. They have eggs inside that hatch, and then the live young come out, which is crazy. We only know this because one did it in an aquarium setting; normally, they have their babies in the depths of the ocean.

I feel the best way to get people interested in creation care and stewardship is through joy, delight, and wonder. The more we study the natural world, the more those wells open up. Telling people the world is on fire isn't motivating. I became a birder about six years ago. I remember posting on Twitter that I was going to get into birding in 20 years. All these birders commented, "Don't wait 20 years, because you'll miss out on a lot of the birds that might not be here." That hit close to home. I bought a cheap pair of binoculars and discovered this incredible world that had been around me the whole time. My poor husband now only wants to go on dates indoors, or he knows he won't get my attention!

It has filled me with delight, but it has also broken my heart a hundred thousand times. The more you learn about the natural world, the more you see what we are doing to it. I don't want to lose the things I love, but because I love them, I see what's happening to them. You asked what my favorite animal in the book is—they are all my favorites! In a world where people are just looking at revenue for the next quarter and demanding constant growth, you wrote a book about humility and descent.

I was taking my kids to school and listening to a song by The Porter's Gate called "Christ is Lower Still." My middle kid, a pastor's kid, said, "This is not an okay song. Jesus is higher, Jesus is lifted up!" Let's talk about what it means that Christ descended for us, and what that teaches us about how we are called to treat one another. We like to lift His name on high rather than acknowledge the humility of Christ. I appreciate that your book points to ways we can walk down the ladder.

You have a great quote in Chapter Nine: "Confession and forgiveness are the tools that help us descend our ladders. If we are going to be part of mending God's broken creation, it will involve seeking a closer relationship to the earth, advocating for healthy soil and animal habitats. It will mean doing the work of lifting up our Indigenous siblings, empowering the women around us, and following our children's lead." Often, animals, plants, Indigenous siblings, marginalized people, and children are our teachers. Jesus talks about this when He says, "Let the children come to me." N.T. Wright notes that Jesus welcomes children not because they are innocent, but because they are incompetent, and there is so much hope for all of us in that.

Caleb Cray Haynes: That's right. Children are not innocent.

Courtney Ellis: We have them, we know!

Caleb Cray Haynes: Yeah, that ends quickly! I love the story about your son reacting to that song. In modern Christianity, we have found ourselves following "Product Jesus" rather than "Rabbi Jesus." We are hyper-fixated on what we get from Jesus rather than following Him. The narrative of overcoming and escaping has done real damage. We aren't saying we don't overcome death, but we are still human beings who age and die. Jesus aged, died, and said, "Carry your cross and follow me."

Along the same vein, later in your chapter on water, you talk about the myth that "God never gives us more than we can handle," which is not actually in the Bible. You write: "All good things must have their limits. 'This far you may come and no farther,' God says to the sea in the book of Job, and He says the same to us. We have limits. We are finite beings." I thought your naming of "soundbite Christianity" was so good. Could you say more on that?

Courtney Ellis: It sells well to claim we have no limits and are invincible, but our lived experience is very different. God tells the sea, "This far and no farther," yet sometimes the sea overcomes its bounds, causing devastation like tsunamis. There is a mythology right now, especially in tech and AI, that humans can transcend their bounds and live forever. To what end? C.S. Lewis wrote that many people long for immortality who don't know what to do with a rainy afternoon. The rainy afternoon is the good stuff! It's about living in the place God has placed us. I just finished a book tour, and it was lovely, but at the end, I just wanted to be home. I didn't know what was happening in my garden, and I missed my son's orchestra concert. All ministry and salvation are local. We need to accept these boundaries not as a restriction, but as a delight God has given us.

Caleb Cray Haynes: We get all these dopamine hits from being busy and scrolling, but scrolling rewires our brains. It's empty. You can busy yourself until you die, take a brief breath at the end, and realize you regret it all because you weren't present. Presence is the ultimate gift. What a shame if life is lived but we aren't present for any of it. There is temptation to always seek the next thing rather than slowing down. The book *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry* talks about the gift of slowness. Even with things I love doing, I have to say no sometimes because I just want to be home with my kids and slow down.

My first book, *Garbage Theology*, was very action-oriented, but this new book is about asking different questions and focusing on our posture. The takeaways are tangible, but they have more to do with "less" than "more." What would it look like to do some pruning? Once we put on the lenses of finitude, we see the areas where we bump up against God's gift of limitation. We try to jump higher than gravity, but I think gravity is love—a loving boundary. You see this everywhere. If we get an electric car, we have to stop and recharge, which slows us down. We used to ride horses and had to care for them. Now, we see AI data centers eating the world just so we can get where we're going faster, eliminating all the learning that happens in the process. College kids are writing papers with AI and learning nothing.

Courtney Ellis: You learn through the struggle. If you snip open the chrysalis, the butterfly won't fly. Strength is formed in the struggle, and we're trying to eliminate it.

Rev. Nicole Diroff: What a beautiful and grounded conversation. Thank you, Caleb Cray Haynes and Courtney Ellis, for sharing this episode of the *EcoChristian* podcast with us here at *Climate Changed*. I was particularly struck by the idea that curiosity offers such a gentle way to navigate life's difficult transitions, and that observing the resilience of the natural world can teach us how to weather change with grace. If you are joining from the *EcoChristian* feed, I offer you a very warm welcome.

Climate Changed is a podcast produced by The BTS Center, exploring some of the most pressing questions about faith, life, and climate change. I encourage you to find *Climate Changed* on your favorite listening platform and subscribe so you don't miss our upcoming Season Five. We want to send a special shout-out to the people behind the scenes who make these audio spaces possible. Special thanks to the *EcoChristian* team, and as always, a massive thank you to the fabulous Peterson Toscano, our producer.

As we part ways today, I want to leave you with a blessing adapted from a prayer for creation attributed to the 4th-century theologian St. Basil the Great: "May God enlarge within us the sense of fellowship with all living things, with our brothers and sisters, the animals to whom God has given the earth as their home. In common with us, may we realize that they live not for us alone, but for themselves and for their Creator, and that they love the sweetness of life." Thank you, dear listeners. Until next time, take good care.