# Climate Reality Panel | Invoking Spirit: How Faith and Wisdom Traditions Can Inspire Climate Action

## Transcript

Sat, May 2, 2026

**Karenna Gore**

Good morning. Thank you so much. I am so happy to be here with Reverend Jen Bailey, who I first met in 2015 in Selma, Alabama, at the 50th anniversary of that historic march that was such an important part of the civil rights movement. I'm going to turn to her in a moment and introduce her, but first to say a word of introduction and context for myself.

I was born in Nashville in 1973 and lived the first years of my life here, between here and King County, Tennessee, Katie Fork Farms. The path of my life has taken me to New York City, where I am at the Center for Earth Ethics at Union Theological Seminary. We started 11 years ago, after I spent a little time as a student at Union Seminary, and after we had a conference there called *Religions for the Earth* in 2014. What the Center does is we draw from faith and wisdom traditions to face the ecological crisis and to discern and communicate Earth ethics for our time.

So before we begin this session, *Invoking Spirit: How Faith and Wisdom Traditions Can Inspire Climate Action*, we want to recognize that, of course, there are many different traditions here—from conventional religions and different spiritualities, indigenous cultures and traditions, and some that really don't like religion or spirituality very much at all for one reason or another. We honor all. Everyone is welcome here. Really, what we're invoking is your deepest values

and beliefs, what you were taught and what you've come to learn is how to live in a good way in this world.

For me, one of the definitions of faith that I find most resonant is actually from the New Testament, but is also quite mystical in orientation, and that is that faith is the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen. I want to invite us to think of a few things in that context. One is to invite here your ancestors—all of us carry lineages from many peoples—and the others are future generations, to bring that here with us into the room. And I also want us to think about the interconnected web of life that we are a part of.

We heard yesterday in that wonderful session at the end of the day about how many benefits, health benefits, we can get from being in nature—emotional and mental as well as physical. And of course, that's because we are in nature. To think about our bodies and spirits and how we're connected to land and water and sky and all the different energies is another thing I want us to bring into the room now.

So, before we turn to the main part of the conversation, if we could just also take a moment to put down our pens and center ourselves. Maybe close your eyes or soften your gaze. Feel your seat. Feel your feet. Gravity, one of those laws of nature, is with us here too. Take a deep breath. Notice the air in and out of your lungs. Feel your heartbeat. Remember that our bodies are made of the elements that are of the Earth—iron in our blood, calcium in our bones. We have about the same amount of water in our bodies as the Earth has in the body of the Earth. So let's bring to mind those trees as we breathe, and the role they play in the oxygen that nourishes us. Soil, the same way. Bring to mind the water—we're in the Cumberland watershed, and the river outside, more than one. There's waters underneath the ground, waters in the sky. Bring that to mind with gratitude. Think of the other living beings, other creatures—birds, the fish, all those that fly and swim and walk the land or underneath the soil. This is a community of life, and there is power and beauty in honoring that and carrying it with us in this work. Take one more deep breath, and open our eyes or bring attention back to the stage.

Please help me welcome the wonderful Reverend Jen Bailey.

So Reverend Bailey, you are an ordained minister, a public theologian, an interfaith leader and practitioner, and a local leader here in Nashville. Your work focuses, in part, on the moral and spiritual dimensions of today's most pressing challenges. So can you please share with us how your life and work in Nashville informs your view of the moral and spiritual dimensions of the climate crisis?

## Reverend Jen Bailey

Wow, y'all, what a question.

So first of all, good morning, y'all, and welcome to Nashville—the place that I built home with my husband and two very young children. I have a two-year-old and a five-year-old at the heart of everything I do.

One of the things that is true about Nashville is true about many of the places where you live: it is a city of both beauty and contradiction. It's a city of music and memory, creativity, struggle, generosity, and inequality. One of the things that I feel in my bones is that the climate crisis is never separate, living here, from the conditions of human life. We feel it in families who are still struggling to recover after what we were told was a generational ice storm—but it seems like those are happening more frequently. In neighborhoods where we're trying to figure out how to access shade and green space and clean water and clean air. I feel it among Max and Celia Pearl, my kids, as I think about what they're inheriting, whether it will be stability or chaos.

Spiritually, I think this crisis really reveals to me, at least, the illusion of separateness. We've been taught to imagine that our air, our atmosphere, the water, the soil that we live in, is disconnected from us, disconnected from the community of life. And life tells us the truth that we belong to each other.

So for me, my work in Nashville through the Dan and Margaret Maddox Fund, which I lead here, is very much about how we live and how we change how we live, focused in that reality, and that reality is only going to be able to move forward if we do it through a lens of love.

## Karenna Gore

Thank you so much. That's profound. One of the things I've been really interested in talking more with you about is these emotions that we carry and feel. There are many people in the climate movement that are carrying anxiety and grief, anger, despair, and sometimes, even as we're witnessing what's unfolding, an element of shame. And it's also true that there are many who are outside of the climate movement and reluctant to come in because they want to avoid the uncomfortable emotions that come up.

I know one of the things that faith leaders do is provide that pastoral care and spiritual support. I want to note that for years, you led the Faith Matters Network, which focuses on empowering activists and organizers to find what you called *spiritual sustainability*. So I'm hoping you can tell us a little bit about spiritual sustainability and the importance of how we process these emotions in the climate movement.

## Reverend Jen Bailey

Yeah, thank you for that question, Karenna. Gosh, y'all. What does it mean to be spiritually sustained in times like these?

For our work at Faith Matters Network, the practice of spiritual sustainability was really about staying rooted in what is deepest and truest while living through what is difficult. For me, as I think about this question—grief, fear, anger, guilt, exhaustion—all of those things make sense to me. In fact, they're not a sign of failure. They're signs that we're awake, that we're really paying attention. I've learned through the years that grief is what love looks like when something we love is under threat.

And I think that we can hold grief with care, and that we have the resources, and that our variety of spiritual, religious, nature-based traditions offer us access to practices that can help keep us grounded.

But one thing I want to note: being awake requires that we attend to what is before us. Because when we ignore grief, it can become numbness. When we ignore anger, it can become bitterness. And when we ignore fear, it can rule us. But when we process this work in community, when we're a part of communities that we know love us, that show up for us and that we show up for—when we practice what in my work I've talked about a lot is collective care rather than self-care, in relationship to our movements—in community, grief starts to look something like tenderness in community. Anger can help us embrace courage in community. Fear starts to look a whole lot like clarity.

I don't know about y'all, but sometimes when I'm angriest is when things become clearest to me. If I'm stewing in my own anger, I can default into that space of bitterness and overwhelm and stuckness. But in community—like, I'm talking to my friend Karenna, and I feel as if you're angry too, or you're fearful too—it starts to help us move toward something that is not just felt individually, but is felt collectively. And from that collective, we can move toward collective action by holding each other gently.

### Karenna Gore

Thank you so much. That reminds me, it came up in one of the conversations yesterday about anger, and that was something that it felt as if people were avoiding that emotion and kind of losing the fuel that it can provide when it's appropriate to feel it. I think that brings to mind being convicted about something, and having the courage of your convictions. We know, having heard from Naomi Oreskes, who was the co-author of the book Merchants of Doubt, that doubt is such an important piece in holding the status quo in place.

So I appreciate so much that you make that distinction about when we experience things collectively in community. That it has a different function and a different tenor than when we're taking it internally and individualistically. Of course, that community building is something that happens in many places in society, but historically, it has happened in faith communities, with people with shared values coming together in that way. Is there something that you learned in being in that line of work that could help us build the movement in the climate space?

### Reverend Jen Bailey

Yeah. I am a proud product of the Black church. I go to Greater Bethel AME Church, which is about five minutes down the road from here, and I was very shaped in that historic tradition. The AME Church—we were a denomination founded out of protests in 1787 to racial injustice.

People are messy and wonderful. That is the thing that being a part of a faith community has taught me. My own sense of self is so deeply shaped by how women I call the church mothers of my childhood breathed life into me, who saw me, who saw my potential in a world that otherwise would tell a little Black girl from West Central Illinois that my limitations were greater than my opportunities. They taught me to imagine. I was thinking about the number of times in cardboard boxes that we would build into spaceships or cars. They showed me the real manifestation of the miracles of loaves and fishes from our faith texts, because of what they could do with some spaghetti and dinner rolls. They could feed the multitudes.

At the same time, I don't want to ignore the fact that there may be many people in here who are sitting with hurt as it relates to religious traditions, because they were messy. They were the first people to check the hem of my dress to make sure that it wasn't riding up too high. They had their own stuff happening behind the scenes.

So the invitation that I think spiritual community has done for me is to invite me to be loved and embraced in the fullness of my humanity. It's taught me how to question, and question well, and wrestle with questions, and not allow that to let me leave a place. I think there's an analog for movement there. It can be real easy, when we're gathering together around common cause, to get very righteous and to bring all of our stuff, all of our hurt, into the place where we were supposed to be facilitating change. It can also be easy to leave when somebody pisses you off.

The thing that community has taught me is what it looks like to stick it out, to be in community, to not throw people away. That doesn't mean that we don't throw toxic people away—we do—but we also create pathways for repair, for them to re-enter community. Those things are

what I've learned just being in church and not leaving, even though there have been times I really wanted to.

### Karenna Gore

Thank you so much. I love the honesty. It's true. I think we all realize that, especially in this time in the climate movement, this crisis is about so much more than data and science and technology, as important as they are, and that more information and more facts is not what is going to carry the day. It's also about human perception, values, who we are as human beings fundamentally. All of those lessons that you just shared with us are so much a part of that, and we appreciate it.

You're now in philanthropy and doing the work in a different way, and I know that a big part of your mission as Executive Director of the Dan and Margaret Maddox Fund is justice, liberation, and shared flourishing. So I'm interested in what those principles mean to you. Starting with justice: what does that look like in the climate space now?

### Reverend Jen Bailey

Sure. So at the Dan and Margaret Maddox Fund, we envision a world in which people and planet flourish together in regenerative systems free from harm and threat. When I walked into this job about a year ago, I was like, *That is the mission of my life. Thank you for writing it down.*

For me, justice really means that nothing in the community of life—notice, I don't say people there, but the community of life—is disposable. No community is written off. No child is told that their future doesn't matter because of where they're born. Justice asks us to tell the truth. It asks us to tell the truth about the conditions of the world that we see.

I think there's a fine line between justice, which is really grounded for me in that lack of disposability, and liberation. So if justice calls us to tell the truth, I think liberation invites us to imagine a dream beyond it. Liberation is both freedom from, for me, but also it's freedom *for* something. It's freedom for things like cleaner air, freedom for sacred belonging, freedom for

economies that actually serve the community of life. It's freedom for a vision in which people and planet flourish together.

I have to say, I see it every day here locally, in some of the amazing organizations that we get to support and partner with at the Dan and Margaret Maddox Fund – groups like Recycle, Reinvest (a few eyes on the room), Urban Green Lab, the National Food Project. Folks who, on a very local level, are living out these justice and liberation principles in a meaningful way. I get inspired. I'm so grateful to be able to do local work in this season, because the noise is loud outside, but being able to ground myself in my community and see measurable progress every day because of the people who are showing up with those principles, and allowing their values to really become their practices, has been really powerful for me.

## Karenna Gore

Thank you so much. I think about those powerful examples that we saw in the slideshow yesterday of the environmental injustice in places where the pollution is dumped or is most strong. I often think of that quote from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., that injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. It's one of those spiritual truths that the climate crisis really is an illustration of. If we took care of people, our neighbors on the ground everywhere, and looked out for their well-being, then we wouldn't be in this perilous situation altogether. It's similar to that truth stated in a different way by the Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh, which you alluded to, about how we're here to awaken from the illusion of our separateness. These are powerful spiritual truths that we carry. That truth-force, *satyagraha*, I think, is the term that was used in the civil rights movement as well. Now is the time to have that carry us forward and break through.

I want to, in closing, invite you to give any advice that you have to this really wonderful group here today about how they can draw from their own deepest values and beliefs to inform and inspire their climate work, and also just to close us in any way that you want, in your own way, as they say in my faith tradition.

## Reverend Jen Bailey

Yes, absolutely. Thank you.

If I had any advice, it would be: begin with what you love. In those moments where you're feeling despair, begin with what you love. Not in an abstract way, but I mean specifically. When we're thinking about the climate, is it the river? For me, it's the creek across the street from my house, where my kids play with the neighborhood kids every weekend. Being able to envision that which you love makes love more durable than fear, and it makes it actually something we can practice in real time and not an abstraction.

Also, I invite you all to think about your values—not just being the values that you hold, but the values that translate into the practices and how you live your life. They will be a guide and a source of your deepest knowing and deepest wisdom.

In my tradition, we often are known for our extemporaneous prayer. But I didn't do that this morning. I wrote you something. As tempted as I was, I invite you to offer you this blessing for the work ahead:

> May you be sustained for the long road.
> May your grief remain tethered to love.
> May your anger be guided by wisdom.
> May your communities make you brave.
> May you rest when needed and rise when called.
> May future generations be blessed because of what you choose today.

And always, peace and blessings.
Thank you so much.