Are We Doomed?
*Thank everyone*
I had a title that put the question in slightly more colorful language, so we went with the slightly more acceptable, but no less stark formulation of "are we doomed?" Now somewhat predictively I am not really going to give you a yes or no answer. I think if our existence was driven by such stark choices the only answer I could give would be "yes, we are absolutely and utterly screwed." However, in addition to our debts and the heavies at our doors demanding we pay, we also live in a world that has grace. I'm thinking of our religious understandings of grace, the sacrifice and new way of being human shown in Christ, the names of God in Islam that testify to God's mercy and forgiveness in addition to God's power, and so on. But I'm also thinking of the last line of my favorite poem by Alan Ginsburg. That poem is entitled Howl and the last lines, called the footnote and so often grace is a footnote to some disaster, never fail, I am not ashamed to admit, to move me to tears. I won't read that whole poem, I worry that we've lost the ability to speak poetry to one another without those awkward feelings creeping up, and I don't want to scandalize anyone by vocalizing the language that put the poem on trial in the first place. I'm still some time before tenure! But I encourage you to read the poem, which I think of as one of the most religious poems of the 20th century. Allow me though just two lines:

"Holy forgiveness! mercy! charity! faith! Holy! Ours! bodies! suffering! magnanimity!
Holy the supernatural extra brilliant intelligent kindness of the soul!"

This is a message of grace. And it is a grace to hear this
message being given in such bodily, no, such fleshy terms. Grace is a concept we like to think of as just being vaguely decent. But true grace is much harder. True grace is dealing with the body of someone who is suffering. And suffering is rarely pretty, it's usually feel of stink, and pus, and blood, and cries of anguish, and sadness. And grace comes to those bodies as a hand, wiping away the grime, holding the person, despite the stench of death, or the smell of incontinence.

You might be wondering why I'm going on about this poem and grace when you thought you were here to hear a talk on the environmental crisis. Well, I am trying to move that discussion away from the usual way this is cast. Let me outline that narrative quickly. It can often feel like the world no longer has a lot of grace in it. In fact, if our films have anything to do tell us, we feel like everything is pretty doomed. *Slides* We are obsessed, it would seem, with the end of the world. With apocalypse. With judgment coming. And you, the younger generation that makes up the main body of the students here at La Salle, have been traumatized with apocalyptic images your entire life. *Slides* So have other kids your age throughout the world. *Slides* And part of that generalized sense of trauma has been the environmental crisis, commonly called global warming, but more accurately called climate change.

Now I'm not going to talk about the science of climate change. I'm going to be as direct as I can be. There is no real debate about the existence of climate change in the scientific community. There is also no real debate in the scientific community about the very harmful effects of our human society upon the wider world. That debate is
largely fabricated by a media that needs controversy to sell their product and businesses who are very short-sighted and protecting their short-term business interests. So, yeah, all of that stuff you hear year after year about the threat of climate change is, to the best of our knowledge, true. And all of that stuff you hear contributes to spreading and pervasive sense of hopelessness, that as a species we are doomed, so why even try to deal with it? Well certainly, if we do nothing, very bad things are going to happen. Part of that hopelessness has to do with how we see politics, as essentially what corrupt politicians in both parties do in Washington. We have told ourselves a story about the challenges to dealing with climate change, presenting it as a culture war between ignorant, faith-based conservatives who hate science holding back legislation versus science-based reasoning that could allow us to stem the tide of our most destructive acts. As in this video.

The truth is far more disturbing and difficult to deal with. Here is a picture of the leaders of the G20 (or whatever number they are calling themselves now). Here is a picture of people who lead the IMF (Christine Lagarde) and here is the leaders of the World Bank. None of them are Christian fundamentalists, many of them have policies that on our contemporary Republican parties view would be labelled as "socialist" (they are not, but definitely to the left of the Republican Party), none of them appear to hate science and many fall in the tradition of a healthy respect and even over-valorization of the sciences as something that can truly answer ethical and social problems, but also science as what drives innovation and innovation as what makes them rich. So... these are the masters of the universe, these probably more so than these, and if that's
the case, then I doubt they much care what Michelle Bachmann or Marco Rubio thinks about climate science. It's just not the case that our lack of any significant action regarding climate change or the wider ecological catastrophe perpetuated by human society, is driven by ignorant religious people overwhelming good, rational science.

As I said, it is far more scary. I'm sorry I should have made a slide for this part. Uhhh... and I don't have any money on me at the moment. Does anyone have a $5 bill I could borrow for a minute?

I want to suggest to you that this, right here, is our biggest hurdle for dealing with the environmental crisis. Because dealing with the environmental crisis is an ethical task and ethics is about values. Values are about time. And time is about bodies. Right now many of you are spending your time here. You are doing so because of your values, because of what you think is worth doing. For some of you that is because you value thinking, you value grappling with ideas for the sake of becoming a fuller human being. For some of you, you value doing well in college, because you are paying for it, and a few professors offer extra credit. Some of the faculty are here because they value being a part of the university community outside of their teaching time as well as during. But you could be spending your time doing something else. Many of your classmates clearly didn't think it worth their time to come.

But I want to suggest that there is, for most of us, some value of values. Something that matters to us more than anything else and that really structures and decides what our actions are going to be. OK, so I'm waving this $5 bill around and I'm claiming that this is, whether or not we
chose it and none of us really have, what we believe in most, what matters to us most. Let me just read what it says. This thing pays debts. Who needs supernatural kindness of the soul when you can just borrow some money to get something and make some money to pay it back. Who needs grace when you can buy some free time... you have enough of this and time isn't really an issue anymore. *Rip it up*

How many of you are a little bit upset with me right now? Why?

This is the problem with the way we have organized our societies today. Economics and ecology collide. They don't fit! I'm going to be a bit quick and dirty with the details here, so my apologies to my colleagues in the business department. But our economic system, a heavily State-subsidized (meaning socially subsidized), market and financial capitalism, is built on the idea of unlimited growth. For an economy to be healthy it must be growing. However, to grow, we have to make things and sell them. To make things and sell them we have to extract resources from the earth, build factories that heavily pollute so we can take those things from the earth and transform them into things like your iPhone, or your car, or this projector. But you can't just buy that one phone and keep it for life, because then Apple or Samsung isn't going to be able to make any money and if companies aren't making any money then the overall growth of the economy stagnates. If that happens your wages fall (though they are falling anyway). So we need you to every couple of years get annoyed and bored with your phone or for it to break and for you to go get a new one. Where does the old one go? Well, most of the parts just get
thrown away, some can be recycled. But some of the stuff on your phone will never ever go away.

As a species we have a fantastic and demonic power. We make things with extraordinary life-cycles. And why does that matter? Because, while our economics is built on the idea of infinite possible growth, the ecology of our planet is finite. It has limits.

To begin to address our warped economics we have to address the old ideas of nature which underlie it. We have a bad understanding of nature. When you think of nature, do you think of this? Or this? I'm willing to guess you think of this. And you're not wrong, you're just not completely right. For the question is bad. This is also nature. This is also nature. And this. And that. Nature is multitudes. Nature is perverse. That's the way I put it in a recent book of mine. And by that I mean that nature doesn't respect norms, it doesn't respect what we think it should be doing or where it should be, it can shock us that nature keeps showing up in those places we think of as so artificial, that nature has something to say to us, for example, about plastic or cities. That nature has something to say about economics. In the somewhat long-term (within the next decade) economic growth will truly meet the ecological limits. And in the fight between capital and nature, well, my bet is on nature. That's the side I want to be on.

So, the challenge facing us requires that we rethink nature and that once we rethink nature we rethink our entire economic organization. That's not pretty. But if we want our species to continue on this planet we need to address these issues. For, nature will be fine without us here, nature won't cease to exist without human beings, but it may be that we create a worldwide ecosystem that we no
longer have a place in. But now there is still time for grace and time to create a remind of money that is less focused on debts and perpetuating itself and upon grace, upon the supernatural kindness of the soul.

OK, so to start off discussion: let's assume I'm right, can such changes take place at the individual level or can they only take place at larger scales, like institutions?