



By [David Gelles](#)



Ayana Elizabeth Johnson Karsten Moran for The New York Times

## Joy in action

There's no shortage of reasons to be alarmed by climate change these days. This year is almost certain to be the hottest in recorded history. Extreme weather is wreaking havoc around the globe. Fossil fuel production and emissions are still rising, and world leaders are not moving fast enough.

But take a moment to imagine: What if we actually succeed in addressing the climate crisis, and emerge into a new, more bountiful, more prosperous future?

While there's plenty of bad news to go around, it's not unreasonable to imagine that enduring progress is within reach. Practically every day, there are encouraging new signs that after decades of dithering, the world is finally getting more serious about tackling climate change.

Wind and solar power are cheaper than ever and are being built at record rates around the globe. Advances in critical new technologies, from carbon capture to fusion power, are occurring with startling speed. Sales of electric vehicles are booming, and badly needed charging stations are being built.

Emissions from China, the world's largest polluter, will peak within the next couple years, many researchers believe. In the United States, the transition to clean power is happening [faster than many realize](#). Those two countries just agreed to [accelerate their efforts to reduce emissions](#), delivering a much-needed jolt of ambition ahead of climate talks in Dubai this month.

Efforts to crack down on emissions of methane — a potent but often overlooked greenhouse gas — are ramping up. Brazil, Indonesia and other countries are taking serious steps to reduce deforestation. Youth activists are using protests and lawsuits to take on the fossil fuel industry. And in a powerful message that could be a sign of things to come, Ecuador voted this year to leave some oil in the ground.

These are the kinds of developments — large and small, from governments and the private sector — that together will determine just how hot our planet becomes. They are also developments that animate the work of Ayana Elizabeth Johnson, a marine biologist and climate expert, who is attempting to shift the narrative around the fate of our planet.

“When we look at climate media, whether that's filmmaking or newspaper headlines, it's often really apocalyptic,” she said. “That can be overwhelming, depressing and — most concerning to me — demotivating. It can feel like, ‘We're screwed, so why bother?’”

But as Johnson told me, “There's a very big reason to bother.”

**‘As right as possible’**

“When I look at the scientific projections, there is a range of possible futures,” Johnson said. “The temperature could go up by 1.7 degrees Celsius globally or by three degrees. Hundreds of millions of lives hang in that balance. So it’s a huge deal that we get it as right as possible.”

Johnson is everywhere these days. A book she edited with Katharine Wilkinson, [“All We Can Save,”](#) was a best seller that highlighted the writings of 60 women working to combat climate change. Her next book — “What If We Get It Right?” — comes out next year. She is on the board of Patagonia, the outdoor apparel company that last year committed all of its profits to protecting nature. And a forward-looking art exhibit Johnson curated, [“Climate Futurism,”](#) is currently on display at Pioneer Works in Brooklyn.

Johnson is not Pollyannish. She knows that climate change is diminishing biodiversity, that vulnerable communities will be disproportionately affected by extreme weather and that drought and famine are likely to get worse.

She bristles at being labeled an “optimist.”

“Optimism assumes that the outcome will be good,” she said. “That’s unscientific. I don’t harbor any sort of assumption that it will be OK in the end.”

But nor is Johnson closed off to the possibility that a climate catastrophe might be averted with the right combination of collective action, technological innovation, conservation, smart policymaking and systemic change.

“What people perceive as hope or optimism is actually just joy,” she said. “I’m a joyful person. I find delight in any number of strange things. I have a lightheartedness that people don’t expect from someone who works in climate.”

## **Three overlapping circles**

Last year, Johnson delivered a [TED Talk](#) titled “How to Find Joy in Climate Action.” In it, she encouraged people who are looking for a way to contribute to create a Venn diagram with three overlapping circles: “What are you good at?” “What work needs doing?” And “What brings you joy?” Where those three things overlap is the opportunity for action.

For Johnson — a marine biologist who grew up in Brooklyn, wanted to protect coastal cities and loved changing laws — that meant co-founding [Urban Ocean Lab](#), a think tank working on policy change to protect populations threatened by sea level rise.

“The opportunity is to do things that you love and that are part of the climate solutions we need,” she said. “If we can find meaningful ways to contribute to the problems we face, it just feels good.”