

The Most Important Number on Earth

A sermon by Rev. Fred Small

First Parish in Cambridge,

January 11, 2009

Last spring I received a news release from the regional communications director of a mainline Christian denomination announcing the Blessing of the Priuses at a downtown Boston church.

“Prius owners in the Boston area,” the release said, “are invited to drive by so their environmentally sensitive vehicles can be blessed. . . . The blessings celebration will be followed by the Running of the Priuses, where SUV drivers will be encouraged to run on foot in front of the herd of just-blessed vehicles.”

51 minutes later, I received a second email with the subject line “cancel email re Prius.”

“I’m afraid I was taken as part of an April Fool’s joke,” the communications director confessed. “The Prius story is a fake! My apologies. Ironically, it sounded like something we would do!”

“Something we would do” . . . Giving her the benefit of the doubt, I’ll assume the communications director meant the blessing of the Priuses rather than the running down of the SUV drivers.

In either event, it’s a sad commentary on the religious response so far to the ecological crisis.

In the face of threats to human survival unprecedented in history, many religious leaders and organizations are responding with utterances of sincere concern, installing compact fluorescent light bulbs and exhorting their followers to recycle.

It’s as if after Bloody Sunday in Selma in 1965, when Martin Luther King Jr. issued his national call to clergy to join him and march together from Selma to Montgomery in the teeth of the Ku Klux Klan and brutal police, we’d said, “Martin, racism is a terrible sin, but we’re awfully busy right now, so we pledge personally not to discriminate against a Negro. In fact, we’ll invite one to lunch any day now.”

Thanks to Al Gore, Hurricane Katrina, and roller-coaster gasoline prices, global warming has finally entered the zeitgeist, from talk radio to the funny papers. But a recent Gallup poll revealed another inconvenient truth: Americans today are no more worried about global warming than we were two decades ago. The same poll found nearly 6 out of 10 Americans believe global warming won’t threaten our way of life during their lifetime. Why worry?

Same as it ever was, sang the Talking Heads.

And you may ask yourself
What is that beautiful house?
And you may ask yourself
Where does that highway go?
And you may ask yourself
Am I right? Am I wrong?
And you may tell yourself
My God! What have I done?

Barack Obama seems to get it. He's a smart man, maybe even a principled one, but as president he is first and foremost politician-in-chief and capitalist-in-chief. Even if he leads on global warming, will Congress follow—Senators and Representatives from oil states and coal states and methanol states and automobile-producing states and automobile-driving states, politicians hooked on campaign contributions from the carbon economy? Is America actually going to change its gas-guzzling, carbon-hogging, “death before inconvenience” ways before we drive ourselves and the planet over a cliff?

Because the cliff is getting awful close, and our brakes are falling off.

Arctic ice is melting fifty years in advance of computer projections. An area of summer ice the size of Colorado disappears each week. For the first time in history, the Northwest Passage is wide open all September. Three summers from now the Arctic could be ice-free.

White polar ice reflects eighty percent of solar heat harmlessly back into the atmosphere. But blue ocean *absorbs* eighty percent of solar heat. Polar ocean water is now warm enough to continue melting ice in winter. The more melting, the more blue ocean, the more melting—an accelerating feedback loop.

It's not the only one.

Methane, a potent greenhouse gas, is surging in the atmosphere, released as warming temperatures melt the permafrost. In some places, eight times more permafrost has thawed in two decades than during the last millennium. Bubbling methane now makes “hot spots” in Siberian lakes and ponds, preventing them from freezing. The more heat, the more methane, the more heat.

Rising ocean temperatures depress coral growth, endangering critical food webs. The shutdown of the monsoon season leads to drought in Darfur. Mosquito-born Dengue fever is now the world's most urgent emerging health problem. Melting of the Antarctic and Greenland ice sheets could result in a seven-foot rise in sea-level by the end of this century, drowning the world's great coastal cities.

“We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality,” wrote Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., “tied in a single garment of destiny.”

Every religious tradition teaches awe of creation, yet we desecrate it. Every religious tradition teaches temperance in sensation and material things, yet we pursue them addictively, vainly hoping to fill our spiritual emptiness. Every religious tradition forbids theft, yet every day we live unsustainably we steal from our children and our children's children.

Throughout the world, poor and working people, and especially people of color, are pollution's first victims. They are least equipped to mitigate the impacts of global warming, and will be the first to join the masses of environmental refugees.

“You have built houses of hewn stone,” said the prophet Amos, “but you shall not live in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine.”

In years to come, as our children struggle with the deadly consequences of global warming, they will ask us the same terrible questions asked after the abolition of slavery, after the fall of Third Reich, after the civil rights movement finally put an end to the shame of legal segregation—the same awful and incredulous questions asked of every human being complacent in the face of evil:

How could you not have known?

Knowing what you knew, how could you have failed to act?

“Power concedes nothing without a demand,” Frederick Douglass said. “It never did and it never will.” At least now we know what we must demand.

350.

350 parts per million carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. That’s what we’ve got to get to.

According to NASA climate scientist James Hansen, who blew the whistle on global warming two decades ago, 350 parts per million CO₂ is the most the atmosphere can tolerate “[i]f humanity wishes to preserve a planet similar to that on which civilization developed and to which life on Earth is adapted.” More and more scientists, activists, and political leaders, among them Nobel Laureates Al Gore, Desmond Tutu, and the Dalai Lama, are embracing 350 as the benchmark of climate stability.

Unfortunately, atmospheric CO₂ is now 387 parts per million and rising. Reducing it will be the greatest collective challenge humanity has ever faced. We have to proclaim the number 350 to every nation, every politician, every voter in the world. And we have to do it fast.

Throughout history, church bells have tolled to warn townspeople of imminent danger. Last month, First Parish in Cambridge joined a half dozen other Cambridge churches and hundreds across the country in the 350 Rings campaign. Beginning at exactly 3:50 pm on the 350th day of the year, volunteers from our congregation rang our church bell 350 times.

Some of us are training ourselves as advocates on global warming. Saturday afternoon, January 31, there will be a climate leadership training right here at First Parish led by Dr. Phil Rice of the Sustainability Institute. If you’re interested in participating, let me know.

In Massachusetts, the Unitarian Universalist Mass Action Network has led religious activism on global warming. They need volunteers and financial support.

The last weekend in February, thousands of youth and young adults will descend on Washington, DC, for Power Shift 2009, the second national youth climate summit. I’ll be there speaking on the role of faith and faith communities. After a weekend of sharing strategies, skills, spirit, and music, they’ll flood the halls of congress, driving home the urgency of bold action on global warming.

And some will go still further.

Since 1910, the Capitol Power Plant has been belching air pollution into residential neighborhoods in Washington, contributing to hundreds of premature deaths each year. A coal-fired power plant in a majority African-American city is typical of an unconscionable pattern of environmental racism in the United States. This plant hasn’t produced a watt of electricity in over half a century, just steam and refrigeration for the United States Capitol Complex. The House of Representatives is replacing its coal with natural gas, but the Senate, led by coal-state senators Byrd and McConnell, has refused. Both senators enjoy generous campaign contributions from coal companies supplying this very plant.

Author-activist Bill McKibben and poet-essayist Wendell Berry have issued a call for civil disobedience at the Capitol Coal Plant on Monday, March 2. Their message will be that coal is dirty to produce and dirty to burn, killing miners from black lung and city kids from asthma. They will call for energy conservation, efficiency, and renewables to

reach the 350 target and stop global warming. Participants must pledge nonviolence in word and deed.

It will be a moral call to action in the tradition of the civil rights movement—as indeed it is a civil rights movement to protect future generations and the most vulnerable among us today.

McKibben and Berry explain, “There will be young people, people from faith communities, people from the coal fields of Appalachia, and from the neighborhoods in Washington that get to breathe the smoke from the plant. We will cross the legal boundary of the power plant, and we expect to be arrested. . . . Our goal is not to shut the plant down for the day—it is but one of many, and anyway its operation for a day is not the point. The worldwide daily reliance on coal is the danger; this is one small step to raise awareness of that ruinous habit and hence help to break it.”

Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of peaceful protesters are expected to risk arrest. I will be among them.

I would be honored to go to jail with my friends and fellow Unitarian Universalists from First Parish in Cambridge. If you’d like to join me in Washington, DC, either for Power Shift or the Capitol Coal civil disobedience, please let me know.

Turning the tide against global warming will require the largest, most diverse, most creative, and most courageous mass movement in human history. We have no time to lose.

For all our dedication, for all our effort, for all our love, we may not prevail. The human race may not survive the insults we have inflicted upon the earth. “As for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end.” But “love never ends.”

250 million years ago, at the end of the Permian period, for reasons no one knows, ninety percent of the earth’s species became extinct. Since then, there have been five more periods of massive extinction, including the present one. Each time, nature has somehow rebounded in astonishing abundance, diversity, and beauty. No doubt it will again. Whether the human species will be part of the picture is uncertain.

Perhaps the mantle of intelligence, creativity, and productivity will be passed to another species that will be kinder, wiser, more farsighted than our own. In the long run, the earth will be just fine, and when it’s time, too, finally passes, surely other worlds will carry on the great adventure of consciousness. But we cannot stand by as the human race destroys itself and countless other species.

On April 4, 1967, one year to the day before his assassination, Martin Luther King Jr. addressed a meeting of Clergy and Laity Concerned at Riverside Church in New York City. Denouncing the war in Vietnam, his words speak as well to the challenge of global warming:

“We are now faced with the fact, my friends, that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history, there is such a thing as being too late. Procrastination is still the thief of time. Life often leaves us standing bare, naked, and dejected with a lost opportunity. . . . Over the bleached bones and jumbled residues of numerous civilizations are written the pathetic words, ‘Too late.’ . . . Now let us begin. Now let us rededicate ourselves to the long and bitter, but beautiful, struggle for a new world.”

Amen and Blessed Be.

For more information:

350.org <http://350.org>

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UU Mass Action Network <http://www.uumassaction.net/>

Power Shift 2009 <http://powershift09.org/>

Capitol Power Plant Civil Disobedience <http://capitolclimateaction.wordpress.com/>