

January 15, 2017
The Second Sunday after the Epiphany
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Isaiah 49:1-7
Psalm 40:1-12
1 Corinthians 1:1-9
John 1:29-42

The film *An Inconvenient Truth* is a 2006 documentary about former Vice President Al Gore's climate change education campaign. It was groundbreaking in its day. The part about the danger of melting sea ice to polar bears was one of the most disturbing—and most ridiculed—parts of the film. It's now ten years later, and a *New York Times* opinion piece published just before Christmas reported that, in fact, much arctic ice has thawed and the polar bears are struggling.¹ The polar bears are struggling, and the climate change deniers will soon be in charge.

Many people are resistant to entertaining even the *possibility* that the scientific consensus on climate change is correct. It's baffling that resistance is so high, when there is so much to lose. There's the macro: the grand canvases of plains and mountains and deserts and oceans and all that is necessary to compose them. There's the micro: for example, the many different varieties of moss that grow in a single forest or the intricate husk of a hickory nut.

Those things are worthy of saving simply for the sake of those things. If that's not enough, one should desire to save them for humanity's sake, because when our surroundings are at risk, so is our physical, mental, and spiritual sustenance.

Some people are already suffering due to climate change. As is typically the case, the people who suffering the most are the ones who were already at the margins.

Snow compelled us to cancel last Sunday's education programs. But the plan had been to kick off our new 9 a.m. adult education series with a session called, "Jesus in the News." The idea was to watch a recent video news clip and then discuss that clip in relationship to our faith. In essence, we would be discussing the question, Where is God in this? I had chosen a video posted the previous Friday on *The New York Times* website. It's about people of Madagascar who are starving because of severe drought that scientists attribute to climate change. The video was a supplement to a written *Times* story that was published last Sunday.² In case you don't know, Madagascar is a large island off the southeast coast of Africa. Wikipedia notes that "Madagascar is a biodiversity hotspot; over 90% of its wildlife is found nowhere else on Earth."³

The *Times* video begins with a group of starving children going out in the evening to harvest the only food available: prickly pear cactus. Prickly pear is the kind of cactus with which we are all familiar. It's the kind that grows low to the ground and has a structure of "pads" with long, hard, pointed thorns and sometimes flowers or fruit. The children favor the fruit, but if there's no fruit, they pull off a pad, remove the thorns, and bite right into it. After showing children knowing on that rubbery raw cactus, the video shifts to a woman who lacks even cactus. Her even more desperate meal was "chalky ash mixed with water."⁴

Where is God in this?

Today is the second Sunday after the Epiphany. On the Sundays after the Epiphany, our Gospel readings focus on the revealing of the human Jesus as divine, as Messiah, as the one anointed by God to be the savior of Israel and the light of the world. In today's reading from the Gospel of John, John the Baptist speaks directly, identifying Jesus as the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit, as the Son of God, as the Lamb of God.

If that news is a relief to John's first hearers, their relief must be short-lived. Almost immediately after John's proclamation, Jesus calls the first disciples. He thus upends any expectation they may have that they can now sit back and watch events unfold. It begins simply and innocently enough: "Come and see." As the story progresses, the simplicity and innocence soon evaporate. Come and see. Come and see the sick. Come and see the possessed and the dispossessed. Come and see the tax collectors and the adulterers and all who have been pushed to the margins. Come and see those who have been separated by happenstance or by intent. Come and see all whose physical, mental, or spiritual sustenance is at risk. Come and see all that; come and see what you can do about all that. Come and see.

Actually, Jesus doesn't even stop with "Come and see." That is just the first part of the enterprise. I am reminded of Sir Isaac Newton's Third Law of Motion: For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. Similarly, for every "coming" there must be a "going." With Jesus it's hard enough to "Come and see." The even bigger challenge comes next: "Understand and go."

A big challenge, yes, but here's an important thing to notice: throughout the Gospels, the disciples are seldom alone. Most often they are in a group. In the beginning, Jesus *calls* the disciples in pairs; later, he *sends* them in pairs.

On Monday our nation we celebrates the life and accomplishments of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. MLK Day weekend began early here at St. Thomas's, on Thursday morning, with the Day School's special MLK chapel service. It featured a guest speaker and relevant songs sung by the children. For me the highlight of the service was my second experience of an annual Day School tradition: the fifth-graders' staged recitation of Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech. If you haven't heard or read that speech recently, do take five minutes this weekend to stream it from the Web. Every time I hear it I get weepy. I seem to get extra-weepy when it's being recited by fifth-graders wearing a rainbow of skin tones.

My MLK weekend continued on Friday evening, with an interfaith worship service honoring Dr. King at Congregation Mishkan Israel, the reformed synagogue on Ridge Road in Hamden. Congregation Mishkan Israel has done an annual MLK tribute since 1961, the year Dr. King himself spoke during the dedication of their then-new sanctuary. Rabbi Herb Brockman opened Friday's service with a powerful welcome and statement of purpose: that people of all faiths join hands to resist all the "-isms" that yet plague our community and our nation. The service featured a combined choir that included Jews and Christians, as well as readers and intercessors of all religious stripes. The guest speaker⁵ offered a powerful indictment of the U.S. criminal justice system, which still hugely disadvantages people of color. Through bleak statistics and personal observations, he shed light on this most shameful aspect of life in America.

Here's one more thing you should know: weepy or bleak moments aside, both gatherings were filled with hope and joy. Both gatherings offered reminders of the hope and joy that Dr. King carried despite all barriers and against all odds. And compared to when I arrived, I left both gatherings feeling as if my hope and joy had multiplied tenfold.

Starving polar bears. Starving children. Death, pain, destruction, injustice. Where *is* God in this?

In reply, I can only say that God *is* present with all humanity and in all creation. God is with *us*. Our readings today, taken as a whole, paint a beautiful picture of a God who is as close as the person sitting nearest you right now—a God who knows you intimately, who touches you personally, who graces you constantly.

God is with us, but that doesn't mean we get to sit back and watch events unfold. The first disciples didn't get to do that, and we don't, either. In fact, Jesus' call to us is much the same as it was to his disciples two thousand years ago. Come and see; understand and go. God is with us, leading and showing, teaching and sending. If we walk the path of discipleship, we *see* God *in* others, and we *show* God *to* others. This exchange is perhaps most profound with those who are the most marginalized. God is present, and God calls us to be present, too. It's not always easy. Jesus seems to say that we shouldn't every try to go it alone; it is in community that we find the hope and joy that sustain us.

If you saw my Enews article this past Wednesday, you know that justice has been a theme in my inbox recently. Things are coming to me that I'm not even looking for. For years now, you've heard me and others say that the church has changed and is changing still. I have become convinced that all the recent shaking up has been preparing us, and progressive Christianity in general, for this moment in time.

At the end of today's service, we're going to bless the people from St. Thomas's who are going to the Women's March on Washington and the affiliated local marches. I understand the marches as statements against sexism and misogyny. These are issues of justice, and issues of justice are always issues of faith.

Fifteen years ago, in a move that was a huge step out of its comfort zone, this congregation was a leader in seeking justice in the church for gay and lesbian Christians. People still come to St. Thomas's because of our clear message of welcome to the LGBT+ community. I have been wondering what it would look like for this congregation to step out of its comfort zone today. I have some ideas, but in the end, only you can answer *that* question. I'm excited about the prospects of partnering with our brothers and sisters of faith in New Haven and beyond. I hope is that the Women's March is just the beginning of a new focus on justice for *this* community of faith.

Today's Collect of the Day says this: "Grant that your people, illumined by your Word and Sacraments, may shine with the radiance of Christ's glory..."⁶ Jesus brings the divine light to the world, illuminating us his followers from the inside out, that we too may cast away the shadows of evil and death. Jesus needs help. There is a lot of work to do. It may sound daunting, but as Paul says, "... you are not lacking in any spiritual gift ...". Note that he is writing to the *community* of Christ-followers in Corinth, not to any one person in particular. It is *as a whole* that we possess the completeness of spiritual gifts. Illumined by Word and sacrament, energized by the hope and joy that flourishes in community, may we shine our lights in the world.

Notes

¹ "Climate Refugees of the Arctic," *The New York Times*, Editorial Board, December 20, 2016, available online at https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/20/opinion/the-climate-refugees-of-the-arctic.html?_r=0 (accessed January 14, 2017).

² Nicholas Kristof, "As Donald Trump Denies Climate Change, These Kids Die of It," *The New York Times*, December 6, 2017, available online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/06/opinion/sunday/as-donald-trump-denies-climate-change-these-kids-die-of-it.html> (accessed January 14, 2017). Also available at that URL is the *Times* film of the same name, by Adam B. Ellick, Ben C. Solomon, and Nicholas Kristof.

³ "Madagascar," Wikipedia, available at <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Madagascar> (accessed January 14, 2017).

⁴ *Times* video.

⁵ Stephen B. Bright, who is a visiting lecturer at Yale Law School and the president and senior counsel of the Southern Center for Human Rights.

⁶ The Collect for the Second Sunday after the Epiphany, *The Book of Common Prayer*, 215.