



“Global Warning”

Someone in this congregation sent me an email of humorous anecdotes entitled, “7 Reasons Not to Mess with a Child”, and I thought I would share one of them with you today.

A little girl was talking to her teacher about whales. The teacher said it was physically impossible for a whale to swallow a human because even though it was a very large mammal its throat was very small. The little girl stated that Jonah was swallowed by a whale. Irritated, the teacher reiterated that a whale could not swallow a human; it was physically impossible. The little girl said, “When I get to heaven I will ask Jonah”

The teacher asked,
“What if Jonah went to hell?”

The little girl replied,
“Then you ask him”.

The language of Heaven and Hell, or of the righteous and the wicked, or of blessings and curses, is not language that we are comfortable with, for the most part. Yet, there it is, front and centre in our readings from Psalm 1 and Luke’s gospel. Presenting us with a stark choice.

Maybe this is appropriate on this first Sunday in Lent. This time between now and Easter—seven weeks—is offered to us as a time for reflection. Traditionally, this is known as a penitential season, a season for

repentance. I remind you that the original meaning of the word repentance is simply to think again, to reflect on choices we have made.

So let’s look at the reading from the gospel of Luke. It comes from Luke’s version of the Sermon on the Mount, known to us for the Beatitudes. But in Luke, the Beatitudes or blessings, are followed by a series of curses, or woes.

**‘But woe to you who are rich,
for you have received your
consolation.**

**‘Woe to you who are full now,
for you will be hungry.**

**‘Woe to you who are laughing now,
for you will mourn and weep.**

**‘Woe to you when all speak well of you,
for that is what their ancestors did to
the false prophets.**

This sounds to our ears like a pretty harsh judgement. But this isn’t the only place in Luke’s gospel that has this language—in fact, it’s all over the place in Luke. Remember Mary’s song, the Magnificat? In this song of praise, Mary sings that God **“has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.”** And again and again in Luke’s gospel this theme keeps coming up, in parables and stories. There is the story of the rich man and Lazarus, the story of Zacchaeus, the story of

the rich fool, the rich young ruler, and others.

Again and again in these stories, wealth is juxtaposed with justice. Luke cares deeply about what we would call the haves and the have-nots, and about the relationship between them.

It is a theme that Luke inherits from the Jewish tradition, a theme that is especially apparent in the prophets of the Hebrew Bible. People like Isaiah, and Jeremiah, and Amos. In ancient Israel it was the prophets who were constantly reminding the people that the best way to be true to their relationship with God was to be just and merciful to their neighbours, especially towards those most vulnerable.

The prophets issued strong warnings, sometimes to the people as a whole, and sometimes to their leaders, pointing to the future consequences of their present course of action. That is the nature of prophecy—not so much a prediction of the future, as a drawing out of the implications of the present.

Luke identifies Jesus as being in the tradition of those prophets, indeed as the greatest of the prophets. So it should not surprise us to hear Jesus speaking in such strong language of warning.

Later in Luke's gospel, Jesus tells the story of the rich man and Lazarus. We are told that this man was very wealthy, that he wore fine clothes and feasted sumptuously every day. And at the end of his driveway, at his gate, lay a poor man named Lazarus. A man who longed to eat the crumbs that fell from the rich man's table. The poor man dies, and is taken by the angels to be with father

Abraham; the rich man dies, and is tormented in Hades.

From the torment of Hades, the rich man calls out to Abraham, begging him to send Lazarus down to him, to dip his finger in water and cool the rich man's tongue. Abraham essentially says, no. In life you had the chance to offer comfort to Lazarus and you didn't. It is impossible for us to offer you help now.

Now I am convinced that this is not really a story that's meant to give us details about the afterlife. It is a story that is meant to focus our minds and hearts in the present, by showing us the consequences of our actions. Rather than being about good people going to heaven and bad people going to hell, this story is trying to wake us up in the present to the future implications of our choices.

It's like the story *A Christmas Carol*, where the three spirits—the ghosts of Christmas past, present and future—visit Scrooge and show him images, scenes from different times and places. The visits are not intended to frighten Scrooge so much as they are intended to wake him up to the consequences of how he is living. They are meant to inspire him to choose another way while he still can. For Scrooge and for us, now is the only moment we've got, to make our choice.

* * * * *

And of course, in our own day, we are not without prophets, issuing to us very similar warnings about the dangers of the path we are on. Hear the words of a contemporary prophet:

**So you have your choice now:
 you can be absurd and reject the
 science;
 you can be reckless and say we can
 adapt to whatever happens;
 or you can be unethical and disregard
 the future, simply because it's
 in the future.**

That's entirely up to you.

These are the words of Sir Nicholas Stern, former World Bank chief economist and author of a significant report on climate change that was released last fall. More recently, this past February 1st, the report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change was released. It predicts, in the words of a recent Globe and Mail editorial, "increased temperature and sea levels, ... devastating droughts and stronger hurricanes, ... reduced snow and ice cover, ... the thawing of permafrost and the elimination altogether of Arctic summer sea ice by the second half of this century."

As Canadians, we learn we are among the greatest per capita contributors to greenhouse gas emissions in the world.

So I want you to use your imaginations here. Imagine if Jesus walked in here today, and stood amongst us. Now imagine if Jesus did what those spirits did in *A Christmas Carol*, and came here and showed us scenes of the impact of climate change.

All right, so imagine Jesus is here, and he points over there, and we see an image of a polar bear, standing on a tiny block of ice barely bigger than its paws, and all around is open sea, because the ice has melted.

And which of us will say, Well, we don't want to jeopardize our economic growth...

Or maybe imagine Jesus pointing into that corner and we see a family of African farmers, standing in what was once a field, but is now cracked dry earth. They are waiting, and hoping, that maybe the rain will come this year, because it hasn't rained there in five years.

And which of us will have the heart to say, Well, you see, you must understand, we don't want to jeopardize our economic growth....

The words would falter on our lips, or at least they should.

The sad truth is that most of the hunger resulting from global warming is likely to be felt by those who haven't caused the problem: the people in developing countries.

And still some of our leaders talk about intensity-based targets, which in plain language means that we won't reduce our emissions, we will just increase them more slowly. In even plainer language, it means not making changes so that that African family can live, but maybe slowing down the rate at which that family, their community, and their people will die.

**'Woe, woe to us, when we are so rich,
 that we can blind ourselves to the
 suffering of others;
 and so full,
 that we forget what hunger feels like;
 and so well-respected,
 that we no longer feel like it is our
 responsibility to care for those
 nobodies half a world away.'**

When we read our stories in that Bible, and we lay them beside our current life situation, those words come off the page and become present to us now. They are addressed to us.

That book, right now, is speaking to us about how we are living on this planet, and the ways in which our lifestyle is impacting other people and other species. And I think the message is pretty clear: our own *comfort* is not as important, and it's certainly not *more* important, than other peoples' *survival*. In the words of an American saint, we must "live simply, that others might simply live."

There is another story in Luke's gospel that suggests how we might do that. It is the story of another rich man faced with a choice. It is the story of Zacchaeus. He was a tax collector, a man who made his living by exploiting his neighbours. When Zacchaeus is confronted by Jesus, he decides to give away half his money to the poor, and to make restitution to anyone he has wronged.

Zacchaeus gives up a lot of money. He gives up a lot of privilege. He gives up a good deal of his economic security. All so that he can give some breathing room to others. Zacchaeus reduces, we might say, his economic footprint, so that others around him might in turn flourish. He has reduced the gap between himself and his neighbours.

At present in our world, we are taking up this much space, economically and ecologically (hands far apart). And we are leaving this much space for other people and other species (hands close together). The story of Zacchaeus suggests that if we took up only this much space (hands middle

distance apart), we would leave this much space for others.

This is what it means to "live simply, that others might simply live."

If Zacchaeus were here today, he might decide to replace his BMW with a Toyota Prius; or, go through his house, and replace all his light bulbs with compact fluorescents; he might install a programmable thermostat to reduce his energy consumption.

That's how Zacchaeus might respond to Jesus' challenge. How are we going to respond? Well, maybe this can be a Lenten practice for this year. The tradition in Lent is to spend some time in prayer and fasting. Maybe over the next seven weeks, we can spend some time in prayer and reflection over the choices we have made, and their consequences. Maybe we can consider making a fast for the earth, and reducing our consumption, to make room for others, and for the planet.

The story of Zacchaeus has a happy ending. As he gives up some of his wealth and privilege, he finds himself restored to his community. No longer reviled and mistrusted, he finds himself at a dinner table with Jesus and with his neighbours. This is a vision of the Kingdom; it is the promise of the Gospel. May it come to be, for us, and for our world. Amen.