

“Every valley shall be lifted up and every mountain and hill be made low”
Sermon by Lynda Bernays and Katie Ong-Landini
Sunday, December 4, 2011

(Katie)

You may wonder why Lynda and I are up here presenting this Sunday’s sermon, instead of the more experienced and excellent preachers you normally hear. It is a rare occurrence that lay folk preach in an Episcopal Church. However, since June of this year, Peter, Lynda and I have been in conversation about our strong sense that we need to foster greater discussion about environmental sustainability issues, referred to in faith language as Creation Care. Each of us felt that we could be missing the opportunity to have an impact on this faith community, as well as the community around us, if we did not develop a plan to encourage this discussion and the changes that need to follow. We were moved to action by an editorial, published in early June in the New York Times, by Thomas L. Friedman, author of The World is Flat. The piece, entitled, “The Earth Is Full,” describes how we are experiencing many signs that our planet cannot sustain the current consumer-driven economic model because the Earth does not contain enough resources. Although Friedman ends on a fairly hope-filled note, that hope will diminish if we, the evolved-brain human species, do not take action seriously.

So, the three of us began by preparing series of articles in the parish eNewsletter—one of which included the text to Friedman’s article. I hope all of you had a chance to read and digest it. Last week, I presented an adult forum titled, a Green Approach to Living the Gospel, which showed a few scriptural passages that have resonated with me about our need to treat the earth and everything in it with sacred care—as well as provided a number of ways that I have tried to live in greater simplicity and environmental consciousness.

When, in June, Peter presented the two of us with the opportunity to give a sermon—thereby reaching a larger, essentially captive audience—we both jumped at the chance. However, as Sunday, December 4 loomed ever closer, we began to ask ourselves, “What were we thinking?”

What seems most daunting to us in this task is that we are often weary and discouraged by being the community eco-freaks. One of the young adults at this

year's Diocesan Convention spoke about finally embracing her "eco-nerdness," and I think this is often how Lynda and I feel. Today's Gospel reading from Mark states:

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: `Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'"

At times, it feels like we are the voice crying in the wilderness, trying to express some truth about the inequity of our use of resources and the destruction and waste of our natural environment. My family has often teased me that as much as I do to be gentle on the environment, my efforts are negated by the actions of many of the people around me—so as much as we do, it seems to make little difference.

(Lynda)

At Kenyon College, an instructor named Andrew Kerkhoff teaches a class called Biological Scaling: Why Size Matters. For homework once a term, he asks his students to watch King Kong -- the movie about the giant ape. The reason for the assignment? In terms of energy needed to survive, an average-size human requires about as much energy as a 100-watt lightbulb. That's what our natural metabolic rate requires to sustain the energy -- warmth-- needed to survive, to maintain body heat. Loosely speaking, that's what any human who simply wants to stay alive requires. For much of human existence, that, and not a whole lot more, was plenty. But we keep adding things -- fire, cooking, lights, appliances, transportation, entertainment, furniture, artwork, communication, computers, electronic devices that seem to reproduce faster than stray cats, -- and by 2011 the average consumption of energy per capita per day in the US is a whopping 12,000 watts.

Fine, but why does Professor Kerkhoff ask his students to watch King Kong? Because the students in his class can take the relationship between energy consumed, metabolic rate and body size thru a few straight-forward calculations and find that if all 12,000 watts of energy were simply used to maintain body warmth, that body would weigh about 33 tons. Take that thru a few more basic biological calculations relating weight to height in primates, and the students get a

36-foot tall primate: King Kong, standing right here before you and sitting out there in the pews. Give or take a few feet, like it or not, we are all hovering in the 36-foot range -- even those who are in reality more like 36 inches.

Thirty-six feet, for those of you who need a few visual aids, is beyond the height of the ceiling. If creatures this size roamed the US, including Alaska, living off the land, so to speak, the land would support about 9000 of them. Not the 309 million who actually call the US home. Simply put, we are living so far beyond our means that we have changed the earth in ways King Kong and his creators never dreamed.

Together, we have made a difference, but not a positive difference. Together, we need to take responsibility for this difference. Together, we can work to bring our voices out of the wilderness and into our communities. Together, we CAN make a difference.

Two weeks ago, on Reign of Christ Sunday, the Penn State abuse news had just broken in all its heartbreaking details, and Peter Faass preached about preventing child abuse and taking responsibility as a community for the safety and well-being of our children. The Gospel for that day was Matthew 25 -- "just as you do it to the least of these, you do it to me." Christ was holding us accountable for our behaviors towards the weak and vulnerable. Peter said in his sermon:

The moral system of the Gospel informs us that God will judge us according to our response to human need in this world. The Gospel holds us accountable for what we have done or left undone. Our own judgment will be based on the help we have given or not given to the vulnerable and those at risk. It is a very clear moral imperative. These acts that Jesus calls us to extend to the young, the needy and the vulnerable are simple ones. But in their simplicity they become powerful acts of compassion in a world that suffers from abject selfishness and the ethos of the value of me over anyone else. Each of us is capable of acts (of compassion) if we make the Gospel the plumb line of morality in our lives.

Peter's sermon spoke to me so clearly that I started scribbling notes as he spoke. For it became clear to me that morning that our over-use of energy, our inability to make enough changes to make a difference in the climate change that has taken place in our lifetime, our refusal to take seriously report after report and article after article pointing this out to us, our lack of foresight of what the future holds, is no less than child abuse towards our children, their children, and their

children's children. It is as negligent towards the weak and vulnerable -- in this case the future generations of the world, starting with Zachary and Addie and Cora and Sydney and Canessa and all the other children in the laps and the nursery and the Atriums of Christ Church -- it is as negligent as turning away were we to see someone physically or sexually abuse them. We must ask ourselves, Why is my lifestyle so much more important than the world my grandchildren will live in? What can I do NOW to start making changes that will make a difference to the world my children will live in? Why are we so appalled (and rightly so) at the sexual abuse of several children but unable to see the abuse we are subjecting all children to?

We must, as Peter said, "make the Gospel the plumb line of morality in our own lives," and when we do, we can start to take steps to live the Gospel as Christ intends us to live it.

(Katie)

This week's passage from Isaiah offers us some insights:

A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

In some respects, this reflects what we learned in this past spring's Lenten series, when we talked about the unequal (or unlevel) economics of pharaoh and the more equal (or level) economics of the Gospel – not till we have leveled the field (and at a considerably lower level than we are on) will the glory of the Lord be revealed, and not until we have brought ourselves down from the 36-ft 33-ton gorilla to a level of consumption that allows the rest of the world – and the world of our children – to prosper will the glory of the Lord be revealed.

But what can we do to level that field? What should that level ground look like? How will we ever know whether our efforts can make a difference?

Despite the challenges of this enormous problem, there are signs that change is afoot, and that momentum is gathering. In the second letter of Peter, it states, "with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one

day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. “ So those of us who feel that we have no power to create change, are suddenly finding each other, teaching and supporting others, and ever so slowly, building a movement for change.

Indeed, the nativity story presents a theology that those who seem most insignificant can have the most impact in bringing about change for the good of the world. Who was this babe born to a peasant carpenter and his young wife, traveling alone from a podunk town in the Appalachia of Palestine? Jesus’ worldly beginnings could not have been more insignificant in the eyes of the world, and yet his message of love and peace and justice for those most in need resonated with so many that a movement—that would eventually transform a large part of the world—began with him.

(Lynda)

If we were to title this sermon, it would be “Together We Can Make a Difference.” I don't know about you, but I get tired of hearing about so many things that I want to change but can't. How can my action change an outcome? How can my donation change the budget? How can my vote change the election? How can my decision change anything?

The answer, of course, is that mine alone can't, and neither can yours (unless you have the resources of a Bill Gates). But yours, and yours and yours and yours and mine can, and that's why we are standing here today. Because we are tired of feeling helpless and frustrated with each article, even the hopeful ones, about waste and energy and global warming and emissions by 2020 and what needs to change; because we know that no matter what we do, it won't make a difference if we do it alone; because we believe that TOGETHER - WE - CAN make a difference; because we believe that as a community we can be so much more effective than as individuals.

Wendell Berry, a poet, writer, farmer, naturalist, environmentalist and philosopher, says about community that a real community consists of people, places, and everything else; that it is an interdependent being; and that it is redeemed by the great interests its members have in common. In other words, only

once the common ground and common good of a community take their place as the most important factors can that community move forward and prosper. Berry also says that not every big problem -- and you know that there are plenty of big problems to go around-- not every big problem has a big solution-- many problems can be solved by hundreds of people accepting local responsibility for small problems. Together, we can make a difference; already, communities acting as interdependent beings make a difference every day.

So how do we do this? As a community, we need to ask ourselves what changes we can make in our lives right now that can start to reduce the amount of energy we and our families consume. Drawing from a number of writers, we can offer you several areas to focus on right away:

- Stop buying bottled water. That's always my starting point, and it's so easy it's hard to justify continuing the practice. The energy consumed in making bottles, pumping, bottling and shipping the water, not to mention the effects on the communities from whom the water is taken, is enormous. Remember the occasional conversations about shipping Great Lakes water to areas of the country who are suffering from droughts? We don't like that idea, do we? That's what happens with every case of bottled water.
- Eat less meat. When you do buy meat, buy meat raised locally on small farms. Commercial production of beef, pork and poultry has resulted in a food system that damages the planet with every mouthful. Want more information? Read Michael Pollen's *The Omnivore's Dilemma* or Anna Moore Lappe's *Diet for a Hot Planet*.
- Buy local organic food whenever possible. This is an extension of "eat less meat." Locally grown produce travels less, is raised by people who hire local workers and spend money in the community, and is fresher and generally safer than food raised on large acreage and shipped thousands of miles. Meat raised locally is pasture-raised and part of a system that makes use of the natural benefits animals and plants offer each other. Because we eat several times a day, every day, how we eat and what we eat matters. We have choices, and we can choose to eat with less impact. Together we can make a difference.

- Reduce or eliminate appliances that are running and/or recharging at any given time. This extends to heating and insulating your home, closing off unused areas, wearing fleece and sweaters and long underwear while you keep the thermostat lower than you have been accustomed to (put that body heat to work!). And this brings us to the heart of the 33-ton gorilla in the room: our dependence on and addiction to electronic devices, electronic communication, computers, computer chips, and the on-line world in general. Know where “on-line” is? It’s not just floating around waiting to be plucked out of the air. It’s in huge buildings that require enormous amounts of electricity to maintain all the information that we expect to have at our fingertips, anytime, anywhere. Look around your home and office and start totally up the number of computers -- not just pcs and apples and laptops, but iPods and iPads and phones and smart phones and Blackberries. Sooner or later we’re going to have to admit that the energy consumed by these devices will have to be reduced.

- Use cars less. Now we're getting into sensitive territory. For some of you this requires some serious prioritizing of school, work, sports, and entertainment choices. That's not easy. We all know that. But I am asking you to take a hard look at how you use your vehicles and make an effort to make choices that allow you to reduce vehicle use.

- Reduce the size of your living and working space. Of course, this will only work if you are in a position to make this change, but it is something to consider as you think into the future. Houses have continued to grow disproportionally to family size, and we use a lot of energy to heat and cool and provide electricity to those structures.

- Reduce your consumption. Period.

- Connect with your neighbor and not with your stuff. Period.

[Lynda continues next page]

We're not here to offer you answers. We're here to ask you to be aware of the effect our 21st-century lifestyle has on the conditions of the 22nd century. We're here to ask you to stop for a moment and make a few choices -- some hard, some easy -- and to act on them. We're asking you to join us as "eco-nerds" and add your voices to the wilderness!

Remember -- together we can make a difference. Together we can help and support one another. Together our efforts might become habits that allow us to focus on more efforts that become habits, and together we CAN make a difference. For the sake of our children and their children, together we MUST make a difference. I believe this is possible, for even when we have a long way to go, in Peter's words, each of us is capable of these acts -- these changes -- if we make the Gospel the plumb line of morality in our lives.