

But What Can We Do?
Sunday, September 22, 2019

On August 18 a first in funerals was held. In Iceland 100 people, among them the country's prime minister, climbed a mountain to place a plaque on a stone. The stone has only recently been revealed. For centuries it was covered by Okjökull, a glacier which was declared dead a decade ago, but which has finally melted away. Inscribed on the plaque are the words "A letter to the future" and below that heading, "In the next 200 years all our glaciers are expected to follow the same path. This monument is to acknowledge that we know what is happening and what needs to be done. Only you know if we did it."

"Only you know if we did it." When I read about the event in August, I despaired. "Will we make a difference?" "Will we do what needs to be done?" I wondered. "What can we do?" "What can I do?" Do you ever find yourself with the same questions? And depending on my level of optimism, "What can I do?" can be a genuine question or a shrug to doing nothing.

And the situation does feel overwhelming. We must cut carbon emissions by somewhere around 50% by 2030 to keep the earth from warming to unsustainable levels. Even if we achieve that, there will be some effects we can't change, species we can't bring back, glaciers we can't refreeze. But we can prevent the Earth from changing even more. Yet our government even under President Obama didn't take as strong stands as were needed and under our current president, previous standards are being removed. It's no wonder we despair and feel the answer to the question "What can we do?" is "Nothing."

Friday around the world student activists led climate strikes as their own life- and future-affirming answers to that question. Inspired by Greta Thunberg, who a year ago began leaving school to protest in front of the Swedish Parliament, 7,000 people gathered in Boston's City Hall Plaza, part of millions who stood and sang and spoke around the world. They gathered to ask their governments to do something about rising temperatures, rising sea levels, increasingly violent and frequent storms, and the ways these changes disproportionately affect the most vulnerable around the world. It was an inspiring start. I was there with a group of us from First Parish. You've heard some of their words of inspiration. One who isn't here to share his word is my son Miles who's camping with the scouts this weekend. I don't usually talk about my family in sermons – I respect their privacy – but I am going to make an exception today – and Miles is okay with this. Like many young people, Miles has been worried about climate change but cynical that anything could make a difference. But he came home with his attitude changed. Being part of that crowd of people and knowing it was but a fraction of people

gathered around the world, he came home with hope. Hope that we can make a difference.

And it's no wonder that Miles came home hopeful. Despair is solitary. Hope is communal. Hope depends on community and on compassion. Both words begin with the same prefix, "com" meaning with. "Community" refers to individuals coming together, while compassion means to suffer with, to feel another's pain as if it were your own. We act when we feel and when we know we are not alone. And that's when things begin to happen. As theologian Jurgen Moltmann wrote, *Together, as a community, we can help ourselves in most of our difficulties.* In the words for meditation on the cover of your order of service, Greta Thunberg contrasts the despair she felt alone in her room with the hope she felt out on the street, even though she was the only one protesting. But one by one, and then more and more, other students began to strike with her in Sweden and then in other countries too so that she began a movement of hope.

Yesterday's marches were not an end in themselves. They changed nothing. But they enabled us to feel the spirit flowing. And that is the beginning of change.

Hope and change can be as infectious as a cold. Think how one person sneezing can get a whole roomful of people sick. So the movement from despair to hope, from inaction to action can also spread. In his new book, *We Are the Weather: Saving the Planet Begins at Breakfast*, Johathan Safran Foer writes about our communal power.

No one motorist can cause a traffic jam. But no traffic jam can exist without individual motorists. We are stuck in traffic because we are the traffic. The ways we live our lives, the actions we take and don't take, can feed the systemic problems, and they can also change them: lawsuits brought by individuals changed the Boy Scouts; the testimonies of individuals initiated the #MeToo movement, individuals participating in the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom paved the way for the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. ...

Yes there are constraints on our actions, conventions and structural injustices that set the parameters of possibility. But... we are free to choose from possible options. And one of our options is to make environmentally conscientious choices.

So what can we do? The Religious Services Committee, with help from some outside environmentalists, have prepared a whole list for you to consider. We'll move to that in a minute. But I want to highlight 4 major areas.

1. Where you can, switch to renewable energy. For some of us, that could mean installing solar panels. But there are smaller and cheaper things we can do too. Raise the temperature on your air conditioning, if you have it, and lower the temperature on your heat. Put on a sweater this winter.

- Get a hot water bottle. Throw on an extra blanket. Have Mass Saves come in to do an energy audit. They give you lots of free things, like programmable thermostats and LED bulbs and will work with you on insulating your home better.
2. Change the way you travel. Walking or biking around town, taking the train or the T into Boston all help. Carpool to church! And if you can cut down on air travel, that makes a huge difference.
 3. Eat more plants, less meat. This is “how we begin to save the planet at breakfast” as Safran Foer puts it. For many of us this is where we could get the most results for our actions. Livestock make up 14.5 percent to the world's annual greenhouse gas emissions, according to U.N. estimates. And if you factor in the loss of the trees and plants cleared for grazing land, such as what's happening in the Amazon, some scientists raise that percentage to 51%. By cutting out dairy and meat from your diet—or simply eating less—you can cut your carbon footprint drastically. A study by researchers at the University of Oxford in the UK found that excluding animal products from your diet can reduce the amount your yearly carbon emissions by 61 to 71 percent. We can also cut down on food waste by buying what we'll use and composting what we don't. And if you don't have a compost bin, bring your greens to the bin here at church behind the memorial garden. Sharing rich compost would be a great metaphor for the richness of life at First Parish!
 4. Reduce, Reuse, Recycle: Buy less – only what you need. Consider ingredients and also the packaging. For instance, I've started ordering my green cleaning supplies from Grove Collaborative instead of from Amazon, since Grove uses only paper packaging and doesn't add plastic wrap around things. They're also cheaper, but that's a bonus for me! Use what you have and use it up. Buy second-hand. Perhaps our thrift-store guru Carol Sullivan-Hanley could give us a guided tour or workshop so that we can imitate her amazing finds. And when you do finish something up, recycle it – not just containers, but clothes and other items. Use Freecycle or Scituate Yard Sale to share things. For clothes, if they're not in a condition for someone else to wear, use them for cleaning rags. Or if they're made of natural fibers, give them to Chuck –he puts them on the paths he's clearing in our backyard to keep down the weeds. Or perhaps a quilter could make something beautiful with them. What about a quilt of the earth to hang in our sanctuary? That would be another lovely metaphor for the richness and beauty of life at First Parish.

These are all ways to make a difference. As part of this series on *Cherishing the Earth and Ourselves*, the Religious Services Committee agreed that we wanted it to inspire us to carry its message outside of the sanctuary and into the world. So we have a challenge for all of us. Around the room are boards displaying things we can do to make a difference. They range from smaller to larger actions, but all doable. We're going to invite you to wander around and read them through, think about them, and then take two or three of the apple shaped sticky notes, write your name on each, and place one by the action you're going to take on. We ask you to commit to doing this action for the next month – through the end of this series on October 20. At that service, a few people will speak about what they did and what it changed. We also ask you to talk to people about what you're doing – people in this church, but people outside it too. Because actions, like hope, are contagious.

I've had some time to think about this, so here's what I'm going to do: First, carry a travel mug with me, so I avoid using single-use cups when I'm out. Second, and more important, Chuck and I are going to follow a plant-based diet for breakfast and lunch. This plan is known as Vegan before 6, VB6 (or VB5 – depending on what time you eat dinner). Not eating animal products for breakfast and lunch can save 1.3 metric tons of carbon per person each year. Though I'm already a vegetarian, this means giving up my yogurt at breakfast and eggs and cheese at lunch. (I am going to make an exception though for the milk in my coffee and tea!) If you're interested in trying this too, I've left a copy of Mark Bittman's book with recipes on the coffee hour table.

I invite you now to wander, reflect, and choose what you will do. If moving isn't comfortable for anyone, I can bring you a copy of the list and place your apple stickies for you. When you're finished, please return to your seats. ...

There's an old Roman saying, *Dum spiro, spero* - "While I breathe, I hope." Or, "As long as I have breath, there is hope." Our very breath makes our hope visible. But these actions make that hope even more visible. They embody our hope. So too does our weekly offering make our hope visible, giving of our resources for the works of this church in the world. I invite you now to make your hope visible through our offering.

- Pamela M. Barz