

Facing the Reality of the Climate Crisis

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Occasionally people tell me that it's strange for a priest to have a background in geoscience and cultural anthropology. I understand that. For me, though, it's the times we live in that seem strange. I've known earth and climate scientists personally. Professionally speaking, they're some of the most cautious and conservative people you would ever meet – careful not to distort or exaggerate their findings as a matter of personal integrity. Most would probably not choose to work with politicians, knowing that their work will become fodder for who knows what in the media.

So as I read their most recent findings in journals of the *American Association for the Advancement of Science* and the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, I feel a lot of grief, but I'm not surprised. For the vast majority of scientists worldwide, the facts indicate that the climate crisis will probably be more severe than expected even five years ago. Serious scientists no longer debate whether this crisis is real. And when they suggest that humankind has never faced anything like this before, they're not exaggerating. Watching the unwillingness of nations to act quickly enough, many of those scientists are afraid for the future – especially those with children and grandchildren.

It's all very personal. It should be personal, not in the sense of knee-jerk reactions, but of the whole person -- body, mind, and spirit. When it becomes deeply personal, and if we're honest

within ourselves, then we remember what's really important in life. This goes way, way beyond politics.

When I was nine years old, my mom and dad called a wise elderly Southern Baptist minister in our hometown and asked him to talk with me privately. They weren't sure what the problem was. I knew, but I was upset and I wasn't saying much. Preacher Morris stopped by the house, and we went for a drive. I struggled to find the words. What had happened is that another minister scared me when he spoke. His ridiculing tone encouraged everyone to look down on others. I'd never heard anything like that, especially from the pulpit. It's not that I was prone to fear. Preacher Morris knew that kids in Southern Appalachia can be an independent lot, and I spent a lot of time outdoors – very little TV, no cell phones or internet back then. In our house, unkindness towards anyone in thought, word, or deed just didn't happen. The Golden Rule (let's say, *treat others as you wish to be treated*) was assumed as if it was written in the air we breathe. The only spoken-out-loud rules that I remember were: *always tell the truth*, and *be home by 5:00 for dinner*. Maybe it was a different world back then, but some deeper parts of life never lose their meaning.

He was a good listener, unlikely to assume he had all the answers. As I poured out my soul, stumbling over my words, I realized what was bothering me and said it plainly: *I just don't believe him ... God is not like that*. Preacher Morris smiled, looked at me in the eyes, and said, *have faith, and always think for yourself and make up your own mind*.

With my mom and dad, Preacher Morris set me on a path that led to becoming a cultural anthropologist and then an Episcopal priest. Early on, I wanted to find out for myself what indigenous peoples living in rainforests are really like and how

they relate to nature. I met shamans in Central America who were some of the holiest people I've ever known. I became a priest because of them too, which led me to the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in Manhattan, St. John's Church in Ellenville, and the global Anglican Communion for whom I served as their environmental representative to the United Nations for almost thirty years. The irony is that nearly sixty years after that soulful conversation with Preacher Morris, the same questions have come around again – faith or fear, thoughtfulness or manipulation, respect or disrespect – but in an unimaginably larger way.

What are we going to say to the younger generation? Two years ago, climate scientists estimated that we have until about 2030 to cut carbon emissions by half, and eliminate them completely by 2050 – if we want to avoid the worst kind of global catastrophe. For people in some places around the world – generally those who are the poorest -- catastrophic effects are already felt. The Arctic, Antarctic, and Greenland ice sheets are melting faster than expected. Agriculture is disrupted by severe droughts and coastal storms in many places, including Guatemala – that's why so many refugees from there are heading to the US. Some Pacific islanders are already leaving their homes because of rising oceans. This past year, Arctic temperatures have been 30 degrees above normal on some days.

The reason we must cut emissions in half within about ten years, and then to zero by 2050 is that if we don't, then we'll reach thresholds (“tipping points”) past which there's no return. It will be too late. Those scientists writing in the journals that I mentioned are saying that the point of no return might come sooner than they thought.

All this might seem more like science fiction than science. Nevertheless, the facts keep pouring in, carbon levels keep rising, and the facts point to a time when most of us will have passed away. It's the next generation that will face the worst of it, unless we act now. Not to act is to gamble with the lives of children. As awful as that sounds, it would be the easiest course of action – and the least faithful, the least responsible, the least thoughtful, and the least respectful.

My mom and dad weren't gamblers and they still aren't. Neither was Preacher Morris. What about you and me?