I have often begun Christmas sermons, and reflections about Christmas, with stories about Christmas Pageants I have seen. Like the time the child portraying the angel Gabriel did not exit the stage after her “annunciation” to Mary. Instead she stayed with Mary through all the rejections she and Joseph and the baby Jesus faced as they were turned away at inn after inn. And Gabriel looked on aghast but never left them.

Or the time the youngest children dressed as sheep were crawling down the middle aisle of the Church toward the stable as “Holy Night” was being sung. But when one noticed all the toys off to the side that had been collected for the needy, he broke ranks and headed for the toys. And so did the rest of the flock.

Or the time at Pageant rehearsal when my daughter Grace had the part of Mary. She was sitting and holding the baby, a real one, when the boy portraying Joseph standing next to her said, “I want to hold the baby.” Mary (Grace) said “No, I’m holding the baby.” Joseph insisted he should hold the baby. Mary said “no, the mother always holds the baby.” Joseph said “this year I should hold the baby.” To which Mary replied, “You know, Joseph, technically you are not even the father.”

Another preacher, I think it was Thomas Long, wrote about another pageant rehearsal. The director was encouraging the young people to read along in their bible as they recreated the story. When they got to the story of the Magi in the Gospel of Matthew, one girl kept on reading. She got to the part where King Herod was furious at the Magi, and ordered the death of every male child under the age of two in an attempt to kill Jesus. She said, “Hey, wait, what’s this? This is terrible!”

The director assured the girl that this part would not be in the pageant. She responded, “No. It is part of the story. We have to include it.”

The director and the young actress settled on a compromise. An actor dressed as the king would stand at the far edge of the stage throughout the pageant, hovering over the story of the first Christmas.

This part of the story makes us feel uncomfortable but it is true. Baby Jesus was not born into a spiritualized abstraction. He was born in the midst of a poor people ruled by a tyrant who was propped up by an Empire. He was born to parents who immediately became refugees fleeing to protect him.
And that is why Christmas is a life changing story of hope that never gets old. As Presiding Bishop Michael Curry, the famous Royal Wedding preacher, puts it so eloquently and so forcefully: “We are the Jesus Movement that is out to change the world from the nightmare it is for so many into the Dream God has for us.”

Christmas is about hope, about dreaming of a better world while we are in the midst of this one. Christmas reminds us of all the love that is around us, reminds us of so much that is good and holy and sacred. At Christmas we tell stories of our “better angels.” Christmas reminds us of generosity and forgiveness and courage – even as King Herod looks on.

Christmas reminds us that God has not given up on us. Just the opposite. We call this baby, “Jesus” – which means “God saves us.” And the angels tell us “do not be afraid. This is a message of great joy.” God is here now, in 2018, in the midst of us.

Merry Christmas.

+Doug
This month the Bishop’s Blog is co-written by The Rev. Dr. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas, our Missioner for Creation Care, and Bishop Fisher.

Everyone (and we mean everyone) knows our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry as “the Royal Wedding Preacher.” He certainly touched souls around the world in his inspired message of the transforming power of love. But did you know that five days later he participated in a Vigil at the White House?
Bishop Michael Curry (C) waits to speak during a vigil outside the White House May 24, 2018 in Washington, DC, in response to what organizers say is “the moral and political crises at the highest levels of political leadership that are putting both the soul of the nation and the integrity of Christian faith at stake.” (Photo by Brendan Smialowski / AFP) (Photo credit should read BRENDAN SMIALOWSKI/AFP/Getty Images)

The Vigil was a witness that both rejected President Trump’s “America First” policies and urged bringing people of all political parties together for the sake of the common good. The Vigil was a follow-up on a declaration Michael wrote with other faith leaders several months before called “Reclaiming Jesus: A Confession of Faith in a Time of Crisis.”

That document includes the powerful statement: “We reject domination rather than stewardship of the earth’s resources.”

As we gather together this Sunday in Pittsfield and Worcester for an Episcopal revival led by the “oh so much more than a wedding preacher” Michael Curry, let’s look at why this is a time of crisis for God’s creation.

The Earth is reeling under many pressures, from an explosive growth in human population and consumption to species extinction, habitat loss, and resource depletion. But our most urgent concern is how human activity is changing the climate. Our fears were confirmed last week when the U.N.’s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the leading international group that assesses climate change, released a major report. The IPCC report was stark: humanity is on the brink of catastrophe. The only way to prevent global temperatures from rising more than 1.5 degree Celsius – the
level that countries around the world have agreed is a safe upper limit for maintaining life as we know it on this planet – is for nations to cut their carbon emissions drastically and rapidly. In just over ten years – by 2030 – the world will need to have cut global emissions in half (45 percent below 2010 levels). To hold global temperatures to 1.5 degree Celsius will require rapid and massive transformation of every level of society. For example, the report calls for a total or near-total phase-out of the burning of coal by 2050.

The task ahead of us is daunting. The world has already warmed 1 degree Celsius from pre-industrial times, and without a massive global effort, the world will warm by 1.5 degrees in as little as 12 years. If we allow global warming to rise by 2 degrees Celsius – to say nothing of allowing business as usual to continue on its present track, which would raise global temperatures by 3.4 degrees by the end of this century – we will live on a planet that is extremely difficult not only to govern, but even to inhabit. The IPCC report warns that there is “no documented historical precedent” for making the sweeping changes in society that would be required in order to hold global temperatures to 1.5 degrees. Yet if we want to prevent massive crop failures and droughts, extreme storms and sea-level rise, and the migration of millions of refugees, and if we want to pass along a habitable world to our children and our children’s children, we need to tackle climate change.

The day of reckoning has come. As St. Paul exhorts, “See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!” (2 Corinthians 6:2). Today is a good day to put climate denial behind us. Today is a good day to reject the climate denial expressed in White House policies that promote fossil fuels and ignore, downplay, or even accelerate the climate crisis. Today is also a good day to admit our own everyday version of climate denial and to step up our personal efforts to reduce our use of fossil fuels.

What next steps can you take? For starters, does your congregation have a “green team” or “Creation care committee”? Whatever you call it, a team of parishioners concerned about climate change can take the lead in educating and organizing its community. You can download an article about how to start a “green team” here. At diocesan convention, delegates will vote on a resolution that asks every congregation to create a green team or liaison.

Here’s another idea: how about eating less (or no) meat? A new report confirms that shifting to a plant-based diet is one of the most effective actions we can take to reduce our carbon footprint, limit climate change, and allow the Earth to keep feeding the global population.

Michael Curry has made Creation Care one of his three priorities. (Racial Reconciliation and Evangelism are the others.) We have said many times that this Sunday is so much more than great speeches by Michael. It is an opportunity to commit to a revival of our souls, our church, our communities and our world. In a time of crisis, may we passionately recommit to fighting climate change and caring for God’s creation.

+Doug and Margaret+
Amazing things can happen when we stop and slow down.

September 20, 2018

A sermon offered at St. Mark’s in Leominster on September 16. Gospel text is Mark 8:27-38.

Everyone knows by now that our Presiding Bishop, the “Royal Wedding preacher,” Michael Curry, is coming to our great diocese for an Episcopal revival on Sunday October 21st. The gospel writers don’t use the word “revival” but I think that was what it was when Jesus preached and fed the 5000. And there was a time when Jesus was not preaching a revival but he himself was in need of a revival. I think that time was the Gospel passage we had last week and I think what happened there impacts what happens in today’s gospel story.

Remember last week Jesus went to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Jesus wanted some down time. And if you read the first seven chapters of Mark’s Gospel you would know why. Jesus goes from Nazareth to Capernaum, then north, then south, across the Sea of Galilee several times. Over a dozen different locations are mentioned. Jesus is on the move. And remember they didn’t have Uber™ in those days. Jesus is walking. His pace matches the frenetic pace of Mark’s gospel – the gospel that has the word “immediately” 56 times in 16 short chapters.

Jesus has to stop and slow down. Amazing things can happen when we stop and slow down. This summer I walked 120 miles of the Camino de Santiago in Spain with my son Geoff.

It is a pilgrimage with a deep spiritual tradition. Thousands and thousands of people from all over the world come to Spain to take part in it. It was a tremendous experience for my son and me. The first few days we were not rushing, just walking at our normal pace. My son is 6 foot three and we both have long legs. That meant going at our normal pace we were passing everyone. And, staying with the custom, we would say “Buen Camino” to each pilgrim that we passed. But not much more. In the last few days Geoff developed a sore knee. It wasn’t enough to stop us but it did mean we had to walk more slowly. And because we did, we walked alongside other pilgrims and got to hear their fascinating stories. We met people from Korea, Ireland, New Zealand, and England. That only happened because we slowed down.
Jesus is tired. He is in need of a revival. And because he slows down a Syrophoenician woman gets to see him. Her daughter has a demon and she is hoping Jesus will cure her. Remember this woman is not from Israel and Jesus thinks his mission is only to Israel. When she makes her request, Jesus says something very unlike Jesus. *Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.* Ouch! Jesus needs reviving.

She answers, *Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.* At that exact moment Jesus is revived. He realizes his mission is not restricted to Israel but is to the whole world. He cures her daughter. And his mission is expanded and revitalized.

For those of you surprised that Jesus learned something new, I invite you to check out Luke’s gospel where we are told three times *Jesus grew in age, wisdom and understanding.* Jesus, fully divine and fully human, had truths to learn.

Now we are ready for today’s gospel and the new place in Jesus’ journey. He arrives in Caesarea Philippi. Caesarea Philippi was not always called that. It used to be Naphtali and it was the location of great deeds performed by Kings David and Solomon. It was a holy city for the people of Israel. But when the Roman army took over Israel for the Roman Empire, they renamed it. Caesarea means, “Caesar’s town.” Philippi was the name of a Roman Tetrarch. The Romans are really putting it in the face of the Jewish people.

Jesus arrives with a large following. At this point Jesus is at the height of his popularity. We know this because not long ago he had a revival with the 5000 people. He has so many followers now that he no longer knows them personally. He has to ask his disciples. *Who do people say I am?* And many are thinking he is the one who will drive the Romans out.

That’s the scene. Jesus with his great following is in a place where people are looking for a revolution. Would he lead them against the Empire? Jesus had proclaimed a different kingdom – one of healing, forgiveness, compassion and hope. But I think at this moment he is tempted with a worldly kingdom. Here’s why. Earlier in his ministry Jesus was tempted in the desert by Satan. The temptations were about seizing earthly power for himself. Jesus rejected Satan that day but Luke’s gospel tells us *Satan left him to return at an opportune time.* The battle was not over. Satan was coming back. This is the moment of his return. It does not make sense for Jesus to be so furious at Peter to say, *Get behind me, Satan* to Peter. He is not calling Peter “Satan.” He actually sees Satan, tempting him once again with the power of this world. At that moment Jesus could have given in and become just another leader written about in history books. Instead Jesus chooses a true revolution – a revolution that changes hearts. A revolution that is still going on as we attempt to change the world through compassion and grace.

And there is another dimension to Caesarea Philippi. The Romans who settled there built temples to their gods. Temples in which sacrifices were performed.
Ruin of the Temple of Pan at Caesarea Philippi

The temple here was to Pan. To Pan, the Romans sacrificed pigs – and threw the remains into the lake, thereby defiling that so that the Jewish people could not drink it. You can understand why the Jewish people wanted the Romans out. When the Romans did that they were following a theology that had existed for thousands of years. Sacrifice animals, sometimes even children, to God so that God might be appeased. "Here God. Take this. And leave me alone. You are a terrible God. Stay out of the life of my family." In the city of the Temple of Pan, Jesus, consistent with the prophets of Israel, reverses this practice and this theology. We no longer sacrifice to appease God. Jesus, the Son of God, now sacrifices for us. This means we no longer push God away. We now invite God into our lives. We can now ask God to be with us. Jesus changes the world by completely changing the way we relate to God and one another. This is a commitment to a new heaven and a new earth.

I'll end with a quote that I am praying every day in this time of our revival. It is a quote from a man named Cyprian who lived around the year 100 in Rome. He wrote to a friend and said,

"The world can be a mean and cruel place. But here in Rome there is a small group of people who care about each other. They give whatever it takes to help each other in need. And they are very happy living this way. They call themselves Christian. I think I will join them and try this way for a while."

Amen.

+Doug
Our church is awake, aware and acting.

July 19, 2018

Presiding Bishop Curry receives a blessing at the General Convention revival on July 7 in Austin, TX.

Presiding Bishop Michael Curry preaches often and powerfully on love. “If it is not about love…it is not about God.” At the General Convention Revival in Austin, Texas, he preached about love for an hour. In that hour he articulated a theology, spirituality and praxis of love that was as tightly reasoned as it was inspirational.

The life and teaching of Jesus certainly centered on love. But in the gospels, Jesus used the words “see”, “look”, “wake up”, “be aware” more often than the word “love.” Somehow “awareness” is essential to a life of love.

General Convention 2018 was all about awareness. Here are just a few examples.

On the Fourth of July we all participated in a “Liturgy of Listening.” This liturgy was a response to the #MeToo movement. It began with the whole House of Bishops expressing in prayer our repentance for “sexual harassment, exploitation and abuse within our Church.” Twelve stories were read from victims of sexual misconduct perpetuated by someone in the Church.
Bishop DeDe Duncan-Probe (CNY) and the Rev. Canon Stephanie Spellers flank Bishop Gayle Harris (MA) as she reads a letter from a member of the clergy recounting sexual harassment and abuse.

Later in Convention, the House of Bishops adopted "A Working Covenant for the Practice of Equity and Justice for All in The Episcopal Church." In this Covenant we commit ourselves to seek changes in our dioceses to combat abuse, harassment and exploitation.

A priest kneels to pray at the edge of the T. Don Hutto Residential Center – prison compound for women seeking asylum in America.

"Seeing" continued as we went to the T. Don Hutto Residential Center – an ICE detention site. There we "looked" at the place where women seeking asylum are imprisoned, separated from their children. Many allegations of sexual abuse have been made against the officers who run the Hutto site.
We prayed and sang and they waved at us through the barred windows.

Doug Fisher @dfisher_WMA · 4h
1500 Followers of Jesus witnessed at Hutto Detention Center Texas. Women seeking asylum waved to us. #GC79
Bishops United Against Gun Violence invited us all to “wake up” to the public health crisis of gun violence by a prayer service in which the family of Carmen Schentrup, a Parkland victim, told her story and theirs, bringing many in the crowd to tears.

Every day we had a brief prayer service in which we handed out 96 crosses for the 96 people who would die that day in gun violence. By the end of the ten day Convention, 960 people were walking around with crosses around our necks, “waking up” to the 960 deaths by gun in our country in that time.
One of the 960 crosses distributed at General Convention by Bishops United Against Gun Violence; an orange stole sold by NJ artist, Colleen Hintz, at GC79.

Later in Convention we “woke up” to the silence of our Congress on gun safety and to the silence of Smith and Wesson to the request of our young people for a discussion. As a result we decided to get engaged with gun manufacturers through “ethical investing”, followed by shareholder activism.

My Committee “Socially Responsible Investing” brought Resolution #B007 to the House of Deputies and the House of Bishops, and it passed.

We also were made aware of the suffering of the Palestinian people through a hearing which packed the meeting hall. We were made aware of tremendous injustice by the stories of 75 who testified. Later, our resolution that called for impact investing in Palestine and a “human rights screen” for investing in Israeli companies, passed.

There are many other moments when we saw with new eyes. I will end this overly long blog with just one more. Going into this convention, there were many calling for revision of the Book of Common Prayer. This was because we are aware that we need inclusive language for God and more references to the beauty of creation and commitment to preserving it as a religious imperative. We came out of it with more than a deadline for developing another book. Through much honest dialogue and listening to the Spirit, what emerged was a promise of liturgical renewal in our Church which will include creating new liturgical expressions deeply grounded in our theology and the continuing guidance of the Holy Spirit leading us deeper into the vastness of our God.

I look forward to implementing the “awareness” of the 79th General Convention of our Church with you.

+Doug
Watch the Liturgy of Listening.

Learn more about BUAGV.

Follow the witness of Episcopalians Against Gun Violence.

Grassroots Leadership petition to release asylum-seekers at the Hutto detention Center and reunite them with their children.
God bless these journalists. God bless all journalists.

June 29, 2018

I don’t write every time there is a mass shooting in our beloved country. I do pray every time there is one (about once a week) and I pray daily for the 95 Americans a day killed in the public health crisis of gun violence. And, with you, I take part in witness events – like those organized by our youth at Smith & Wesson. I contact politicians locally and nationally pleading for gun safety laws, and engage in socially responsible investing for our Episcopal Church to buy stock in gun companies to gain influence in stockholder meetings.

But I am writing today about the most recent mass shooting at the offices of the Capital Gazette Newspaper in Annapolis. Five people dead. Two wounded. Threats made on social media in advance of this horror. On February 20 of this year, we held a “Blessing of Journalists” at our Cathedral. It touched the soul of bishops and church leaders throughout the country who will be offering it the future. In that liturgy we acknowledged the great blessing that journalists are to us.

We pray, in this changing era of journalism, for those from the various forms of media who fulfill the sacred trust of reporting on the lives and events of this world.

We acknowledged how crucial they are to democracy.

“If you want to preserve democracy as we know it, you have to have a free AND many times adversarial press. And without it, I am afraid we would lose much of our individual liberties overtime.” Sen. John McCain

And we prayed for journalists who are in physical danger throughout the world.

We remember especially those who are pressured by their government, those who are threatened and silenced, those who are put in harm’s way by their work, and those who have lost their lives throughout the world reporting on the news.

Physical danger to journalists has now struck close to home. It is not state sponsored. It is by no means government sanctioned. But our government bears the responsibility for our gun laws, and our government officials bear responsibility for the way in which they refer to the work of journalists as, “fake news.”

We pray for the dead and the wounded. We pray for the grieving families. We pray and we continue act for policies that address the public health crisis of gun violence. And we call for the end of tweets and speeches from the highest office in this land condemning journalists and demeaning their work – work that often places their lives in jeopardy.

Jesus gave us a Spirit that guides us in his mission of mercy, compassion and hope. It is also a Spirit of courage and prophetic power. May we have the courage to let Jesus’ mission guide our lives completely. If not now, then when?

+Doug
It’s time we move from Windsor to Washington

May 21, 2018

It’s been wonderful watching the world meet our Presiding Bishop. 29 million people heard Michael Curry preach, as only Michael can, on the joyous occasion of a royal marriage. I’ve enjoyed the excitement and the opportunity this event created for evangelism – for reaching out to new seekers who want some of the joy and hope we have found in Jesus. But it’s Monday morning and we’ve got work to do.

It’s time we move from Windsor to Washington, DC where “that guy from the royal wedding” will walk in prayerful vigil to the White House. As a signer of Reclaiming Jesus: A Confession of Faith in a Time of Crisis, Presiding Bishop Curry has made it clear that we are about the Gospel of love, solidarity with the poor, the marginalized, the immigrant and the refugee. Time is up for those who have used the Christian faith as a weapon, co-opted a message of compassion and used it to amputate away parts of the Body of Christ.

As Michael Curry moves from the wedding feast to witness at the center of power, let’s go with him. Let’s read this statement as individuals and in our congregations. Let’s mine it for wisdom and Tweet out the sentences that resonate with our experience of this time. Signing this statement took moral courage. Let’s celebrate that our Presiding Bishop is more than a great preacher. He is a follower of Jesus and that road will never be easy.

It’s also time to send our children to school unafraid. It’s time for our cities – where children of color fear the walk to and from school – to be safe again from the threat of gun violence. There are too many schools to list, too many names of children who will never know a wedding day. #Parkland is past, and now it’s, #SantaFe. We cannot lose heart even as our hearts break.
On Saturday morning June 2nd I am speaking at the first gathering of a new branch of the Massachusetts Coalition to Prevent Gun Violence in Worcester. The State Democratic Convention happens to be meeting in Worcester and we have invited them to join us. On Sunday June 3, I will wear an orange stole as a sign that no human being should ever be a target. Wear Orange Weekend starts on June 1st — National Gun Violence Awareness Day.

Bishops United Against Gun Violence is a partner in this effort. We are all weary of the cycle, but it's more important than ever to stay with the movement, to give one another strength for this witness. Just as we keep returning to Smith and Wesson, we will continue to mark the death of Hadiya Pendleton, a black Chicago teen murdered by gun violence in 2013. Our Presiding Bishop has charged us with racial justice and reconciliation. The epidemic of gun violence highlights the intersectionality of the issues we face.
It's time to take action on climate change – together. On Wednesday I will join Bishop Alan Gates and the Rev. Dr. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas at a joint press conference with Cardinal Sean O’Malley.

Unprecedented changes to our fragile island home have brought together people of faith and science. Faith and science are the gifts that will enable us to reverse damage done and chart a course that is true to our interconnectedness with earth.

It’s Monday morning, my friends. The party is over and it’s time to get back to the sacred work of Reclaiming Jesus, standing against racism and gun violence, and advocating for the earth.

+Doug
Would Jesus get away with the Lord’s Prayer in Congress?

May 7, 2018

With many of you, I am following with interest the controversy surrounding the Chaplain to the House of Representatives, Patrick Conroy S.J. I'm reflecting on it from the viewpoint of someone who was a "guest chaplain" for a day on September 22, 2010. The Congressman from my district (the 22nd in New York) Scott Murphy nominated me for this honor.

The Rev. Doug Fisher, Fr. Daniel Coughlin, and Congressman Scott Murphy, NY.

The Chaplain at that time was Fr. Daniel Coughlin, a Roman Catholic priest. He was warmly hospitable to Betsy and me. Before my prayer, which would open the day in the House, Father Dan took us on a tour. When we arrived at the Chapel, knowing Betsy is also a priest, he asked her to say a prayer for us in that sacred space.

In 2010 our nation was still in the throes of the recession caused by the 2008 crash. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were still raging. And, like now, immigration was hotly debated. In trying to offer a prayer that was more than generic, I wanted to include the unemployed, immigrants and those serving in our Armed Forces. Here is the prayer in full:
Father Conroy seems to be in trouble with Speaker of the House Paul Ryan for a prayer he gave in October 2018 as the new tax laws were being debated. In that prayer Conroy asked for God’s blessing, and urged lawmakers to “guarantee that there are not winners and losers under the new tax laws, but benefits balanced and shared by all Americans.” After that prayer, Conroy recalls Ryan saying “Padre, you just got to stay out of politics.” Conroy believes that this prayer, and a desire to have an Evangelical chaplain who might be more conservative politically than a Jesuit, were the causes of the request for his resignation (which he gave and then rescinded).

I would argue that my prayer, and that of Father Conroy, stand in a tradition of prayer that is incarnational – praying with a God who “dwells among us.” The Psalmists and Jesus prayed in this way. Their prayers were not abstract. Their prayers were not disembodied.

Consider the Lord’s Prayer. “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed by thy name.” So far, that prayer would be OK in Congress. But then it gets political. “Thy Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread.” In heaven there are no “winners and losers” so it should be that way here too. Jesus is calling for a kingdom where all are fed. Would Jesus get away with saying that in Congress?

At the Continental Congress in 1774, there was a contentious debate over prayer. The decision was to allow it.
The Rev. Jacob Duche, an Episcopalian, prayed, “Take them (American states) under Thy nurturing care…detest the malicious designs of our cruel adversaries; convince them of the unrighteousness of their cause.” With that prayer ringing in their ears, the 1789 Constitutional Congress declared that every day they were in session would be opened in prayer. It has been that way ever since.

As one commentator on the Conroy controversy put it: “Taking care of the poor and standing against injustice is part of his (Conroy's) sacred creed.” I think our elected leaders need to hear that creed. I do. Every day. Do you?

+Doug
Climate Change: We must go about our mission of changing hearts

April 24, 2018

Recently Betsy and I went with friends to a restaurant in Great Barrington. When the waiter handed us our menus, we all noticed a statement on the cover of the menu: “Drinks will be served without straws. If you want a plastic straw, we will supply one upon request.”

That led us to a discussion of “The Great Pacific Garbage Patch” floating right now in the Pacific Ocean. It is described by National Geographic as “a soupy collection of marine debris – mostly plastics.” You can read more about it here.

One might dismiss this plastic straw story as just another example of “crunchy granola” Great Barrington in the Southern Berkshires. Or one can see it as an invitation to the larger picture of how we treat God’s creation. This is where a newly published book by my friend, The Rev. Jim Antal comes in.

Jim’s most recent book is Climate Church, Climate Change: How People of Faith Must Work for Change. The book is the product of a deeply prayerful life that has led Jim to engage the crucial issue of climate change with rigorous scientific study and a passion to care for God’s creation. (He credits our own Margaret Bullitt-Jonas, Missioner for Creation Care, for her input into the writing.)

Here is a description and scope of the book in Jim’s own words:

“This book invites people of faith- together with their faith communities- to accept that God has called us to bear witness in a time such as this- a time when the continuity of God's creation is in jeopardy. I suggest that the enormity of this moral crisis constitutes a theological emergency (italics mine). To resolve this emergency, God is calling the church to initiate a moral intervention.”

Jim goes further to express this mandate:

“Do you believe in God? Then you have a moral duty to fight climate change.”

The “theological emergency” is expressed in some of the title chapters which certainly got my attention:

- “The Earth is the Lord’s, Not Ours to Wreck.”
- “A Loving God for a Broken World.”
- “The Church’s Vocation Today.”
- “The Marks of the Church in a Climate Crisis World.”
- “The Church Was Born for This.”
- “Self-Giving Love in Place of Self-Centered Fear.”
After delving deeply into theology, science, and politics, Jim offers numerous examples of what a moral intervention based on our theology and spirituality looks like. This is good and holy work but it will be challenging. A recent review of the book in *The Chicago Tribune* highlighted the magnitude of what is necessary: “The chapter entitled ‘Discipleship: Reorienting What We Prize’ outlines the basic challenges in social and economic priorities Antal thinks are necessary to realize this goal. Americans, he believes, must reject and rethink ‘our insatiable desire for material growth, our uncompromising insistence on convenience, and our relentless addiction to mobility’.”

That will require a change of heart, but isn’t that what the Church is called to do? Recently former Congressman Bob Inglis (Republican) from South Carolina, said “science can convince our minds that climate change is real and we must act now to preserve the planet. But it is religion’s job to change our hearts.”

Jim Antal’s book tells us why and how we must go about our mission of changing hearts. It might begin with giving up plastic straws but it can’t end there.

+Doug

US Congressman Bob Inglis (R) SC
Easter is not an April Fool’s joke.
April 1, 2018

It is a long time and several snowstorms since Ash Wednesday. Do you remember the date of Ash Wednesday this year? February 14. Valentine’s Day. How romantic was it to hear those words: “Remember you are dust and to dust you will return.” And now we have Easter Sunday on April Fool’s Day. But we have words that sound like Valentine’s Day. “Remember Love is stronger than death. And to that love you are returned.” And I’m here to tell you that the Resurrection of Jesus is not an April Fool’s joke. No, it is a reality that changes our lives.

But before I get to that reality that changes our lives, I have to admit the earliest disciples thought, at first, that the Resurrection was an April Fool’s joke.

In John’s Gospel, when Mary Magdalene sees angels in the empty tomb, she weeps and asks the angels where his body has been taken. In Luke’s gospel, the women saw the tomb empty and were given a message by “two men in dazzling white” that Jesus was risen. But when they go back to tell the eleven remaining disciples that news, “the disciples did not believe the women because their words seemed to them like nonsense.” In Matthew’s gospel a rumor circulates that the tomb was empty because someone stole the body. And in Matthew’s gospel, when the eleven see Jesus on the mountain, “some worshipped him and some doubted.”

And in Mark’s Gospel it is even worse. The women go to the tomb. A young man dressed in white tells them (1) don’t be afraid; (2) and go and tell the good news that Jesus is alive. He is risen! He has gone ahead of you to Galilee. The next line, the last line in the entire Gospel is “They fled from the tomb in terror and amazement. They said nothing to nobody. They were afraid because…”And the gospel ends there.

Now I know some of you are going to google “ending of Mark’s gospel” and you are going to find the “alternative endings” to Mark’s gospel in which the fear is gone, Jesus appears to the disciples and everyone is talking about it. I’m going to let you in on a little secret. Those alternatives endings were added by monks who were hand copying the Bible many, many years later. They could not bear the fact that the story from Mark ends in fear and silence. So they added a couple of happy stories. Like the ones that were already in the original texts of Mathew, Luke and John. Now hang in there because I’m going to come back to Mark in three minutes and forty five seconds.

The first reaction of the disciples is Resurrection of Jesus is an April Fool’s joke. How did they get from that to a belief so strong that they would literally give up their lives defending it? Eventually they got there. Eventually we can get there.

Let’s back up to my favorite story – the Feeding of the 5000. And I humbly think it was Jesus’ favorite story too. It is the only story of his ministry that gets into all four Gospels. And in two of the Gospels – Mark and Luke – it is followed a few days later by the Feeding of the 4000. (This shows that even in the time of Jesus, average Sunday attendance was declining.) And sometimes, when the disciples don’t understand what just happened, Jesus says – using his frustrated voice -“oh if you only understood about the loaves and the fishes, you would understand this.”

You all know the story. Jesus goes away to a deserted place to pray. 5000 people hear about it and join him there. All day long he preaches and heals and forgives. At the end of the day, the apostles tell Jesus all those people out there are hungry. And they are in a deserted place. No restaurants. I know people in Massachusetts are saying “there must have been a Dunkin’ Donuts. They are everywhere.” But no, not even a Dunkin’ Donuts. Jesus says “you give them something to eat.” The disciples say “we don’t have enough. Just five loaves and two fish.” Jesus says, again using his frustrated voice, “Give it to me.” He thanks God for it, breaks it, gives it away and God multiplies the grace, all 5000 are fed and there are 12 baskets of broken pieces left over.

This story tells us a lot about humanity, God and the church. But for this sermon I’m just going to stay with God. The God we meet in creation and the God we meet in the Bible is a God who over creates. Think about our God who we meet in nature. If you look out at the sky at night and you see a dozen or so stars, it is beautiful. Maybe you did that with your loved one on Ash Wednesday/Valentine’s Day after you heard the message you are dust. But God did not make a dozens of stars. God made millions of stars. More than we will ever see. Because God over creates.
Think about trees. In a couple of months we will look at the trees and they will be beautiful. If there were a few hundred leaves on those trees, they would still be beautiful. But as we know in New England in October, when you leave church on a Sunday and are trying to rake all those leaves before a Red Sox playoff game or a Patriots kickoff, there are not a few hundred leaves on a tree. There are thousands. Why? Because it is the nature of God to over create. We have a God of abundant life.

Jesus, the human face of God. Jesus, the one who reveals God to us, over creates. The 5000 are fed. And there are 12 baskets of broken pieces left over. There is more than enough because that's who God is.

Here's what that means for you and me. Because of God, we don't have just enough grace to get through the day. Even on our worst days, even if it doesn't feel like it, we have more than enough grace. We can't use up all the grace God has put into our lives. And, when we come to the end of our time on earth, there will be more life. Not because we have earned it, but because we can't possibly use up all the life God has given us.

Let me back this up with wisdom from some really smart theologians. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr wrote this about Resurrection and nature:

“Our Lord has written the promise of Resurrection, not in books alone, but in every leaf in springtime.”

Walter Bruggemann, a brilliant contemporary theologian:

“The power of the future lies not in the hands of those who believe in scarcity but of those who trust in God’s abundance.”

Now let's go back to Mark. We know the last line in Mark’s Gospel is fear and silence and stops in mid-sentence. The first line of his Gospel is strong and definitive. “The Beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” And then we get 16 chapters telling of the mercy, compassion and hope of Jesus. It is a story of a life of transformational power. You know that phrase we use so often – “it is what it is”? Jesus didn’t believe that for a second. Jesus changed everything. Sinners became forgiven. The sick became healthy. The hungry were fed. The poor were lifted up. The oppressed became free. Scarcity became abundance. Those trapped in fear became courageous. Bread and wine became his Body and Blood. And there was an urgency to these transformations. In 16 short chapters, Mark uses the word “immediately” 56 times. So of course Jesus is going to transform death. Jesus is not going to look at death and say “it is what it is.” Life will be changed not ended.

Phillips Brooks, bishop of all of Massachusetts in the 1890’s wrote:

“Tomb, thou shalt not hold him longer. Death is strong but life is stronger. Stronger than the dark, the light. Stronger than the wrong, the right. Faith and Hope triumphant say Christ will rise on Easter Day!”

So why did Mark ends his gospel in fear and silence with no period at the end of the last sentence? He does it because the story is still going on. The story of transformation and resurrection has begun in Jesus and that story has not ended. It continues down through the centuries and in you and me. As theologian Marcus Borg says, “because the tomb could not hold him, he is loose in the world. He is still recruiting for the Kingdom Of God.” The Resurrection of Jesus is not an ending but an invitation to new life. A life that is free of fear and cynicism and “it is what it is.”

The past few weeks we have seen that understanding in the rising of our young people. They experience the public health crisis of gun violence and say this doesn’t have to be what it is. We can transform this reality. And they tell us their marches are not an ending but a beginning. We see it in the rising up of those who say we can save the planet from the destruction of climate change if we act now. We see in all of our individual lives when we get up again after failing. Thomas Merton says, “To understand Easter and live it, we must renounce our dread of newness and freedom.”
Easter is not an April Fool’s joke. It is an invitation to New Life now and forevermore. If you don’t believe me, believe Bruce Springsteen when he sings about the garden of the empty tomb of Jesus in The Rising:

“I see you Mary in the Garden,  
In the Garden of a thousand sighs.  
There’s holy pictures of our children  
Dancin’ in a sky filled with light  
May I feel your arms around me  
May I feel your blood mix with mine  
A dream of life comes to me.”

Amen.
Blessing of Journalists: The truth will set us free.

February 20, 2018

Below is the text of Bishop Fisher’s exhortation given today at the Blessing of Journalists at Christ Church Cathedral.

Henry Luce wrote “I became a journalist to come as close as possible to the heart of the world.” That sounds like a calling of religious magnitude.

I have been asked “why a blessing of journalists?” Well that goes to the nature of blessing. Blessing is both an appreciation and a commitment.

Those blessed “are” a blessing. You are a blessing to our democracy and essential to our common life. As Thomas Jefferson said:

“Our liberty depends on the freedom of the press, and that cannot be limited without being lost. Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the later.”

In our own time, Senator John McCain:

“If you want to preserve democracy as we know it, you have to have a free AND many times adversarial press. And without it, I am afraid we would lose much of our individual liberties overtime.”

You are a blessing because you tell the stories of the poor, the abused, the underrepresented, and the oppressed. These are the people that Jesus and the Prophets raised up. And you do too. Thank you for telling the stories of Dreamers. Thank you for giving voice to those teenagers in Parkland Florida who demanding changes to our grossly inadequate gun laws. I am grateful to you for giving voice to the earth, which is so vulnerable to climate change. This is holy work. Thank you for speaking truth to power.

You are a blessing because you help build community. From small town newspapers to big city daily papers to radio and television and news streams on the Internet, you have the power to gather people in ways small and large. Churches do that but it does not need to be a church service that brings people out of isolation into community.

And you are a blessing because you are an inspiration. I was in high school during the Watergate years and several of my
classmates went into journalism because they were inspired by the journalists of that time. Many have compared this era to Watergate. Right now young people are watching you and wondering if they too are called.

Blessing is an appreciation and it is also a commitment. It is not another "our prayers and thoughts are with you." Prayer is a prelude to action.

One of those aforementioned high school friends of mine who went into journalism wrote this to me: "We all need blessings in this time when curiosity about others, truth and compassion are under daily assault."

My own Communications Director, Vicki Ix, who is in frequent communication with many of you, thinks of this time like the days of Noah. "It feels to me as if a storm is coming and we are building an ark. People of faith and journalists share fundamental values that may be critical in the days ahead."

Journalists, you are a blessing. And people of faith bless you with our commitment, because the one we follow said "The truth will set you free." And with you, we want to come "as close as possible to the heart of the world." Amen.

+Doug
What I long to know.

February 16, 2018

“In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Iturea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.” Luke 3:1

In the second year of the Presidency of Donald Trump, when Paul Ryan is Speaker of the House, and seventeen students and teachers are killed in Stoneman Douglas High School, and AR-15’s are bought legally, and the NRA contributes millions a year to buy votes, and there have been 1607 mass shootings since Sandy Hook, what is the word of God saying to the Church in the wilderness?

+Doug
In 2020 the United States government will undertake a census of the people. There is a lot at stake in the census, but the most important thing for us to remember is that federal funds will be allocated for ten years based on this census. When the numbers are inaccurate, the funding is inadequate. One of the reasons for an inaccurate count is that there are human beings living on the margins who do not get counted: people experiencing homelessness, the elderly poor, veterans with PTSD, those suffering from addiction or fleeing domestic abuse. Churches — ours included — can help support the work of the census because many of these people are part of our lives.

In Western Massachusetts we have significant engagement with the poor and elderly through our "outdoor cathedrals" in Pittsfield, Greenfield, Northampton and Springfield. We also serve lunches to military veterans in eight locations. And "Walking Together," a storefront ministry in the challenged neighborhood of Main South in Worcester, offers a welcoming space for 12 Step support, and community programming.

My church leaders in these areas tell me "couch surfing" is the biggest reason that the poor go uncounted – staying with friends and relatives for a short period of time and then moving on. This is especially true when the count is done in the winter. The Rev. Jenny Gregg, who leads the outdoor ministry Cathedral of the Beloved in Pittsfield, told me many individual stories of people who would share space with a friend in rented apartments and then would be forced to leave when the landlord found out about the arrangement. She also reports that many feel unsafe in the shelters because the shelters are underfunded and have too few staff.

"Friends of the Homeless" had 1000+ individuals sleeping in their facilities in 2017. They have a marginal number of beds compared to the number of people needing beds. In some facilities there are as many as 20 people a night sleeping on the floor.

My deacon at Springfield’s Church Without Walls says the “tent cities” in Springfield are constantly shifting locations.

Although much of our work is in urban areas, there is tremendous need in the rural areas. Studies show the average weekly wage in the "hill towns" is 43% of the state average. And the poverty rate for young children is 23% in Greenfield, 22% in Ware and 39% in Montague. The Berkshires is aging faster than the rest of the commonwealth and many struggle with rising health care costs and transportation.
There are good people already preparing to make this census comprehensive. The Census Equity Fund has a plan for making 2020 a census that reflects the needs of all the people in the Commonwealth. The Episcopal Church stands ready and willing to help count all of our neighbors. We are blessed with several strong ecumenical partners and we will work with other churches in this effort. We will do this because in God's eyes everyone counts.

+Doug
A few weeks ago, Bishop Alan Gates of the Diocese of Massachusetts and I signed an Amicus Brief on behalf of our dioceses joining 85 other religious organizations in support of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA).

Yesterday Alan and I joined with Episcopal City Mission in supporting Centro Presente in a witness at Boston City Hall. We heard from immigrants here in this country through Temporary Protection Status (TPS) and from their children.

The Rev. Arrington Chambliss, Executive Director of Episcopal City Mission, Bishop Fisher, Bishop Alan Gates of the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts. Photo: D. Fisher

These are two separate political issues relating to immigration, but my participation in both is rooted in one theology. Biblical imperatives about welcoming the stranger abound throughout the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament. Here are just a few:

When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord.
your God (Leviticus 19: 33-34).

If your brother becomes poor and cannot maintain himself with you, you shall support him as though he were a stranger and a sojourner, and he shall live with you (Leviticus 25:35).

You shall not oppress a sojourner. You know the heart of a sojourner, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt (Exodus 23:9).

For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me (Matthew 25:35).

Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God (Romans 15:7).

Let brotherly love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares (Hebrews 13:1-2).

At a prayer service before going to City Hall, Natalie Finstad of Episcopal City Mission described a key aspect of the early Church as she understands it from the book Transforming Mission by David Bosch.

“The nature of the early Christian mission manifested itself from the new relationship that came into being in community. Jew and Roman, Greek and barbarian, free and slave, rich and poor, woman and man, accepted one another as brothers and sisters. It was a movement without analogy, indeed a ‘sociological impossibility.’ Small wonder that the Christian community caused so much astonishment in the Roman Empire and beyond. In fact, the Christian community and its faith was so different from anything known in the ancient world that it often made no sense to others.”

Community. At City Hall, Mayor Marty Walsh took up that theme.

“They (immigrants here through TPS) are our neighbors and coworkers. They’re members of our faith community. They own homes and businesses. Taking this protection away these young people and family members will not make our community safer. To the contrary, it’s going to introduce chaos.” (Cristela Guerra for The Boston Globe)

Chaos. Ten-year-old Gabriela Martinez of Leominster contrasted her dreams with chaos. She told the crowd that she wants to teach English as a second language to help immigrant families. She said that she doesn’t want to see families destroyed or divided. “In order to accomplish our dreams, our parents and family need residency, not just TPS,” the fifth-grader said. (Boston Globe)

Much of recent theological reflection has centered on finding out what God is up to in the world. We have a dynamic God, a community of divine Love always active, and not confined by, the church’s walls. I see God acting in the work of Amy Grunder, Director of Legislative Affairs for the Massachusetts Immigrant and Refugee Advocacy Coalition (MIRA). We had a long conversation in which she said she needs more allies in Western and Central Massachusetts. I see God acting in the testimony of Centro Presente and in the support of Episcopal City Mission and continuing collaboration of our two Episcopal dioceses. And, I see God at work in our Church, The Episcopal Public Policy Network is following these legislative developments closely and provides us with everything we need to advocate.

**Protect Immigrant Youth: Support the Dream Act**

**Defend TPS**

Presiding Bishop Michael Curry has given us a working definition for the 21st century. “We are the Jesus Movement that is out to change the world from the nightmare it is for so many into the dream God has for it.” Some of the change will come about if we resist the forces of chaos and become the community God intends for us to be.

+Doug