

At the 10:30 am service on May 2, 2010, The Rev. Cornel Barnett delivered the following sermon:

“Climate Change Conversion”

My sermon today is based on an article entitled: “Jesus and Climate Change – The Journey of Evangelical Leader Rich Cizik.” This is another Earth Day sermon and it throws a light on “evangelicals,” a group we don’t generally speak about. It’s a cultural statement and proclaims good news.

The article was written by Paul Rogat Loeb as an Op-Ed piece for “Truthout,” a website that focuses on undercovered issues. Loeb uses material from his book *Soul of a Citizen: Living with Conviction in Challenging Times*, published by St Martin's Press.

The Psalm passage on creation today relates to the Earth Day theme of caring for the earth and the Revelation text speaks in symbolic language of God’s ideal world where the sea of turmoil and turbulence is replaced by a new heaven and new earth, with a beloved city and God in her midst wiping tears from eyes and supplying sustenance from the spring of living water. It’s the lectionary passage for today. Both passages provide a backdrop for the sermon.

Now, the sermon:

As vice president for governmental affairs of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), Rich Cizik represented 30 million members. Considering himself a "Reagan conservative" and a strong initial supporter of George W. Bush, Cizik had been with the organization since 1980, serving as its key advocate before Congress, the office of the president, and the Supreme Court on such issues as opposition to abortion and gay marriage. During the Clinton era, he had begun to expand the organization's agenda by tackling such issues as human trafficking and global poverty. Later he'd persuaded the organization to take a stand against torture.

But he thought little about climate change until 2002, when he attended a conference on the subject and heard a leading British climate scientist, Sir James Houghton, who was also a prominent evangelical.

"You could only call the process a conversion," Cizik said. "I reluctantly went to the conference, saying 'I'll go, but don't expect me to sign any statements.'

"Then, for three days in Oxford, England, Houghton walked us through the science and our biblical responsibility. He talked about droughts, shrinking ice caps, increasing hurricane intensity and temperatures tracked for millennia through ice-core data. He made it clear that you could believe in the science and remain a faithful biblical Christian. All I can say is that my heart was changed. For years I'd thought, 'Well, one side says this, the other side says that. There's no reason to get involved.' But the science has become too compelling. I could no longer sit on the sidelines. I didn't want to be like the evangelicals who avoided getting involved during the civil rights movement and in the process discredited the gospel and themselves."

One day during the conference, Houghton took Cizik on a walk. It was a lovely day, sunny and bright. Houghton said, "Richard, if God has convinced you of the reality of the science and the Scriptures on the subject then you must speak out."

"Let me think about it," Cizik responded. He knew he'd meet resistance from his colleagues and board. But Houghton convinced him that the world couldn't solve the issue without serious American participation, and that the Republican Party was the major political force blocking action in the United States. Cizik said: "As evangelicals, we're 40 percent of the Republican base, so if we could convince the evangelical community to speak out, it could make the key difference." Houghton told him that American evangelicals might literally hold the fate of the planet in their hands.

After leaving the conference, Cizik began reading and learning. Flying over the Sahara, he got a sense of the "tens of thousands of acres that are lost to climate-related desertification each year," which in turn leads to major refugee migrations and potential wars over water. He coordinated a retreat with key evangelical leaders, like Rick Warren, and major scientists, like Houghton and Harvard's E.O. Wilson. Then he took a similar group to Alaska to witness the melting glaciers and permafrost, the disruption of native communities and the spruce trees dying because the bark beetles now survived the warmer winters.

They visited Shishmaref, a village that is being forced to relocate because the permafrost has crumbled beneath it and the sea ice that once served as a storm buffer is gone. Cizik recalls: "Our first night there, we saw a lunar eclipse, shooting stars, and the Northern Lights. It reminded me of the phrase in the Psalm, 'Creation pours forth its praise to its creator. . . . The heavens give witness to God's glory.'"

Cizik said his Alaska group "included those who believe life on Earth was created by God and those who believe it evolved over three and a half billion years. What became obvious to both groups is that this Earth is sacred and that we ought to protect it. God isn't going to ask you how the earth was created. God already knows. God's going to ask, 'What did you do with what I created?' If we're leaving a footprint that destroys the Earth, we've failed to be good stewards."

The more Cizik learned, the more it challenged him to "treat caring for God's creation as a moral principle," and to continue enlisting others. In 2004, Cizik persuaded the NAE to release a paper called "For the Health of the Nation," which urged its members to live in conformity with sustainable principles. He talked of "creation care," and stated, "Because clean air, pure water and adequate resources are crucial to public health and civic order, government has an obligation to protect its citizens from the effects of environmental degradation."

Two years later, he helped organize the Evangelical Climate Initiative, a major statement from 86 key evangelical leaders, including major megachurch pastors like Warren, the presidents of 39 Christian colleges, and the national commander of the Salvation Army. The statement described climate change as an urgent moral issue for Christians and

called for the government to act on it.

As Cizik expected, not everyone was happy with his taking environmental stands. "I had people on my board who said, 'Don't touch the issue. If you do, we'll make your life very difficult.'" Twenty-two evangelical leaders signed a letter urging the NAE not to take a position on global climate change. James Dobson, founder of Focus on the Family, and such major conservative activists as Heritage Foundation founder Paul Weyrich and the Family Research Council's Gary Bauer called for Cizik's firing.

Cizik attributed some of this to "simple ignorance of the science" and "bad theology - people who believe the Earth is going to be destroyed anyway, so why bother." But he also wondered how much came from people "fearful that they'll lose their power and influence and their capacity to raise money. They're afraid they'll offend political allies."

But Cizik and the others persisted. "As a biblical Christian," he said, "I agree with St. Francis that every square inch on Earth belongs to Christ." If we don't pay attention to global climate change, it's pretty obvious that tens or even hundreds of millions of people are going to die. Britain's Christian Aid talks of climate change impacting one billion people by mid-century with drought, floods, disease and malnutrition."

Although Cizik and his allies never quite convinced the NAE to take an official stand on climate change, and he was eventually forced out after telling radio interviewer Terry Gross that he was beginning to rethink his opposition to gay civil unions, the organization reaffirmed the moral importance of "creation care," a core perspective that encouraged further dialogue. And Cizik started an organization, the New Evangelicals, devoted to issues such as poverty and environmental engagement.

"The issue shook my theology to its core," Cizik concluded. "It changed me as much as my being born again 30 years before. This threatens the whole planet, so it raises a basic issue of who we are as people. Climate change isn't just a scientific question. It's a moral, religious, and cosmological question. It involves everything we are and what we have a right to do." Amen.

Adapted from the wholly updated new edition of "Soul of a Citizen: Living with Conviction in Challenging Times" by Paul Rogat Loeb (St Martin's Press, \$16.99 paperback).

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