

*The Third Sunday after the Epiphany*  
*Revised Common Lectionary, Year C*

*January 21<sup>st</sup>, 2007*

*Episcopal Church of Our Saviour*  
*Mill Valley, California*

**Globalization in the Arctic**

The Rev. Belle Mickelson

Jesus was "filled with the power of the Spirit" as he began his ministry. People in the synagogue were shocked when he claimed to fulfill the words of the prophet Isaiah. These words are still shocking...and carry great responsibility—when we realize Jesus passed this Spirit on to us. He wants you--and me--to be filled with the Spirit. We are anointed. We are challenged "to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind... to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim" that this is the year of the Lord!

So how can we bring good news to the poor? What are our responsibilities and moral obligations toward the earth and its peoples, the beauty of God's creation? Today, with joy in the strength of the Lord--we can begin anew to speak for justice, to heal ourselves, to heal our neighbors near and far, and to heal the earth. Let's start by listening to another text from Hebrew scripture—stirring words that the Rev. Martin Luther King often used.

*"Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."  
Amos 5:24*

Think about what water means to desert people... These words, God's words, were spoken to people living in the arid regions of the Middle East by the prophet Amos almost 3000 years ago. Imagine people gathered there at the dry, dusty marketplace... Amos starts talking. "The Lord roars from Zion." Did you hear that? "The Lord roars from Zion." Amos definitely had their attention. Like a lion, he was roaring. Amos condemned the rulers and the rich for trampling on the poor, for living in excessive luxury. Amos spoke against war crimes—against genocide. And he spoke against worship services that were "just for show." Amos is the first example of a prophet who served as "the nation's conscience, condemning those in positions of power and influence for ill-treatment of those who

cannot defend themselves."<sup>1</sup> Justice in Amos' time was not today's static "western tradition... that of woman, blindfolded, holding a set of balances before her."<sup>2</sup> Justice was "like a surging, churning, cleansing stream. All is in motion and commotion... an onrushing torrent... the expected *response* of God's people to what God has done for them... (And this response means acting) as *advocate* for the powerless.

*"Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."*

Up in Alaska, we have a different experience with roaring water. There is a strange phenomenon called a "bore tide." It's part of what happens when the difference between high tide and low tide is 30 feet. People sit for hours waiting for the "bore tide" to come. And there it is—a wall of water stretching across the entire bay. It comes in from the ocean, rolling, rolling, rolling... A long wave, sometimes 10 feet high. No one can stand up to it or stop it.

That's what justice can be, once we get it rolling, once we get it in our minds and our hearts. Nothing can stop it...

Up in Alaska, there's lots of ever-flowing streams coming out of the mountains and glaciers. The cold waters cascade off the rocks, with the endless summer sun highlighting the shimmering water... And that water tastes so good. I'm thirsty just thinking of it!

That's what righteousness can be. Once we get the taste of it, we want to drink it forever....

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This summer, I spent a week with the Rev. Trimble Gilbert, an Episcopal priest from Arctic Village. We were teaching gospel music, guitar and fiddle to Athabaskan kids in the village of Tanana--a three hour plane flight away from his home. He telephoned and spoke his Native language, *Gwitch'in* every day to Mary, his wife of 50 years. Trimble plays fiddle and calls dances. He has a quiet sense of humor and fascinating stories about growing up in Alaska in the thirties. He's the kind of person a lot of people would follow anywhere. And three of my son's bluegrass friends did just that. It was June 4 and snowing big flakes. Church was starting soon. Dan, Todd, and Conor all followed Trimble in for a quick dip in the Yukon River. I can still hear their joyful screams and the splashing. Just fifteen

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<sup>1</sup> John Barton, "Amos Introduction" *The New Interpreter's Study Bible NRSV with Apocrypha* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003) 1279-1280.

<sup>2</sup> James Limburg, *Hosea—Micah: Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988) 107.

minutes later, they were all in church geared up to play music—and Trimble was vested ready to preach.

Trimble and his wife Mary are some of the Indians who fear that proposed oil drilling on caribou calving grounds in the Arctic Wildlife Refuge will end their way of life. Writer Rick Bass was in their village for a Christmas Eve service and heard Trimble preaching from his well-worn bible covered with caribou hide. Trimble told the congregation, "We are the last people. I hope you understand that. All the people with money are against us but we don't want to lose our culture.... God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble."<sup>3</sup>

Sarah James also lives in Arctic Village. She talks about the sacredness of the caribou. "They are our food... We do caribou dances and we do caribou songs, they are everything to us. They are part of our language, related to it; our lifestyles, they're related to it. We're caribou people."<sup>4</sup>

Is anyone out there thinking—why don't they just buy meat? It reminds me of the French queen who when she heard that people didn't have bread said, "Let them eat cake!" Store groceries in the villages cost three times what you pay here. Cabins with outhouses, snow piled up in the yards, clothes drying on the line, sled dogs and snow machines are typical. There are very few jobs—little cash. People live off the land. Harvesting the land—hunting and fishing, picking berries are their work. Walking out on the tundra on a hunting trip feels like stepping on spongy moss. There's the beauty of the red fall colors on the tiny willow trees in the crisp cool air. And the taste of caribou—ahh—it's so incredibly good!

Caroline Frank says, "Our children draw pride from the caribou. The herd reaffirms our way of life; it tells them they are the descendents of some of America's strongest hunters." Adds Kenneth Frank, her husband, "Our culture is thousands of years old. Is just a few years of oil worth all that? Or will the white man want to destroy the land and the most beautiful animals on it?"<sup>5</sup>

If you're not a white male, you may like to let them take the rap for Athabaskan justice issues. But we all use oil. And oil spills....

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It was March 24<sup>th</sup>, 1989. I was living in the small Alaskan fishing town of Cordova. "There's been an oil spill," someone said. "I don't have time for that," I

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<sup>3</sup> Trimble Gilbert as quoted in Rick Bass's *Caribou Rising* by Larry Schwiegher in "This Land is Whose Land?" a book review in ChristianityToday.com

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/books/features/bookswk/050321.html>  
<sup>4</sup> Sarah James as quoted by Chip Duncan, "Is ANWR Worth Saving?" at [www.duncanentertainment.com/anwr.php](http://www.duncanentertainment.com/anwr.php)

<sup>5</sup> Caroline and Kenneth Frank as quoted in "Hunting for Their Future" by Bert Gildart in *National Wildlife Magazine* Oct./Nov 1997, vol. 35, no. 6 at [www.nwf.org/nationalwildlife/articlecfm?issueID=14&articleID=584](http://www.nwf.org/nationalwildlife/articlecfm?issueID=14&articleID=584)

responded. Little did I realize that it would impact my life like a steamroller of justice rolling backwards. Soon we were all doing two jobs: our own and another one doing *anything* we could to clean-up or help out. It was a sunny spring and summer—just beautiful—and only 50 miles away everything was covered in black goo. Sea otters, sea birds, fish, eagles, whales—all were dying. We didn't realize it—but in many ways, the fishing way of life was dying, too. Seventeen years later, there are half the numbers of boats in the Prince William Sound seine fleet fishing for salmon. Our spring herring fishery and the crab fishery has still not come back. Yes, there have been other factors contributing to this loss—increased numbers of farmed salmon, ecosystem and ocean temperature changes, fishing technology. But there is no doubt that the oil spill dramatically and drastically affected fish—especially spawning herring, salmon eggs, and crab larvae. The Sound is very slowly recovering—but there is still oil on the beaches—leaching its poison into the waters. Far worse than these environmental effects—were the social impacts: depression, drinking, drugs, broken families, loss of income and a way of life... and the health of spill workers who now suffer mysterious diseases—the effects of trying to clean up such a hazardous substance—oil. It was such a sign of the times, a drunken captain running a tanker on a rock on Good Friday.

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So it's 2007. What does this message from God, spoken so long ago through the prophet Amos—have to do with you and with me? Could it be that we are also oppressors of the poor? Residents of the United States rarely realize that with "their SUV's and minivans, larger houses, and frequent travel, they contribute five hundred times more greenhouse gas per person than does the average Nepalese."<sup>6</sup> They do not see that the oil sustaining their lifestyle comes from"<sup>7</sup> places like wilderness Alaska where in the process of drilling and transporting oil--air and water are polluted, major wildlife populations endangered, and indigenous cultures are threatened.

The Arctic Wildlife Refuge in northeast Alaska is one of "the largest in the nation... (It is) the most significant on-land polar bear denning habitat in the U.S."<sup>8</sup> These bears are some of the animals most threatened by ice melting due to global warming. Millions of birds, including snow geese, loons, and snowy owls nest and raise their young. There are musk ox and wolves. I remember being only three

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<sup>6</sup> "South African NGO Coalition," *NGO Matters* 3:3 (April 2000) 9.

<sup>7</sup> Oronto Douglas, "Eco-Justice in the Niger Delta," *YES: A Journal of Positive Futures* 9 (spring 2000) 22-23.

<sup>8</sup> The Wilderness Society. "Arctic Refuge: America's Serengeti" at [www.wilderness.org/ourissues/arctic](http://www.wilderness.org/ourissues/arctic)

feet away from an *ooguruk* or bearded seal just offshore. Seeing the migration of the 130,000 Porcupine caribou herd is one of the wonders of the world.

The oil companies want to drill for oil in the Refuge, crisscrossing the wilderness with pipelines, gravel pads, roads, airports, gravel mines, and worker support services. They leave a big footprint. Small oil and toxic chemical spills are a regular occurrence. Current oil production facilities in nearby Prudhoe Bay emit twice the amount of nitrogen oxides as Washington, D.C.<sup>9</sup> Nitrogen oxides are "an important component of smog."<sup>10</sup>

The Gwitch'in have submitted an intervention to the United Nations asking "the U.S. Congress and President to reverse the threat of 'cultural genocide' by recognizing the rights of the Gwitch'in people to continue to live their own way of life by prohibiting development of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge."<sup>11</sup>

As Jonathan Solomon said, "It is our belief that the future of the Gwitch'in and the future of the caribou are the same. We cannot stand by and let them sell our children's heritage to the oil companies."<sup>12</sup>

Alaskan Bishop Mark MacDonald stated, "Protecting the environment of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is one of the defining moral issues for our time... (In) the protection of the Porcupine Caribou Herd and the Gwitch'in way of life—the Arctic Refuge will display, forever, both ways we value life and the way we understand our relationship to our Creator.

"Just as the buffalo has become a symbol of an earlier generation's arrogance, the caribou of the Arctic Refuge will be a symbol of this generations deepest values. Will we show our wisdom and reverence in the face of the mystery of life, or will we show our folly and disrespect for God's ordering of creation? Very few issues portray so clearly the human choice between death and life. Let us choose life."<sup>13</sup>

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One of the messages from the Exxon Valdez oil spill was that we are all part of the problem. We all use oil. But should we be drilling for more oil when as a nation, we haven't really tried energy conservation? Last week, the President announced that he was opening the Bristol Bay area for oil leasing. Bristol Bay is home to the world's largest salmon fishery. Remember when Jesus fed the people with bread and fish? Incredible fish are still there in western Alaska in vast

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., "North Slope Oil Development: Air and Water Pollution, Spills, and

<sup>10</sup> National Research Council, *Cumulative Environmental Effects of Oil and Gas Activities on Alaska's North Slope* (Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press, 2003) 41.

<sup>11</sup> The Wilderness Society.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

quantities—feeding the world with salmon—and halibut, Pollock, and crab. Yupik Eskimos and Aleut peoples depend on them for their subsistence lifestyle.

The hour has come. It is time for us to use our gifts and talents. All of us are needed. We can be part of the solution, one choice at a time. Walking or driving; lights off or on when we leave the room; a neighborhood ball game or watching TV; a contribution to a food bank or extra “stuff” for ourselves; cold or hot water to wash our hands. It takes oil to run the hot water heater; to heat factories; to make the products we see in stores; to transport them to stores. Get your family together and investigate what you can do. Live more simply. Save some oil for your grandchildren and great grandchildren; save some money; save cultures in other parts of the world. Maybe even stop a war that might have something to do with oil... Vote. Thousands of Gwitch'in Indians, Yupik Eskimos, and Aleuts will thank you. The generations to come will thank you.

Are you getting the picture? Look around. What are issues of justice for you? Do you like the sound of righteousness? Is the Spirit filling you with love and compassion... coming into your hearts and minds? *Listen* to the mysterious, roaring voice of God... Say it after me.

*"Let justice roll down like waters,*

*and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*

Amen!