



## The Leap from Polar Bears to Plastic

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**T**he Indianapolis Children’s Museum has the well-deserved reputation for being the finest example of its kind in the world. I take my kids there several times a year to see the six-story glass tower, *Fireworks of Glass*, designed by artist Dale Chihuly; the early twentieth-century carousel with its hand-carved circus animals; and the huge polar bear, standing on its hind legs, its teeth bared in a silent ferocious growl.

The polar bear and I are old friends. When I was a kid, the museum was a tiny one-story attraction, and the bear inhabited a dimly lit corner. I could reach out and touch its coarse white hairs and feel the hardness underneath—not its skeleton, but a taxidermist’s frame. I read much later in Barry Lopez’s book *Arctic Dreams* that the polar bear’s hairs are actually tubular structures that allow it to regulate its body temperature and to tolerate the frigid seas where it lives, hunts, and raises its young.

The polar bear has become a symbol in the last few years, a “canary in the coal mine,” an indicator of climate change that the world is experiencing. The unique adaptations that enable it to live in an icy world have been shaped over millennia, but the pace of warming is much faster than that. Video footage of emaciated bears, swimming miles in search of food, is pathetic and shocking.

Still, it’s not always easy to make the leap from “polar bear populations are declining” to “I must recycle my plastic.” We must make that leap,

however. Trusted scientific authorities on climate change now believe that it is happening and that it is linked to human activity—particularly because of our use of fossil fuels and their byproducts, including plastic.

We must make that leap because we are earth’s caretakers. God gave us the job to care for the earth before sin stained us. It is one of God’s original commands, and is connected with who we are as created beings—to be human is to care for God’s good earth. We alone have the capacity to appreciate God’s creation, to protect it, and to see God’s character reflected in it. The Bible teaches us that redemption includes not just us humans but all of God’s created order, and that all will be redeemed—even polar bears (read Revelation 21 for the end of the story). Caring for the earth is deeply Christian, worshiping not the creation itself, but the God who imagined it. “This is my Father’s world,” the old hymn goes. “In the rustling grass, I hear him pass; he speaks to me everywhere.”

Most people I know consider themselves good people, even good Christians, but don’t feel motivated to make changes in their lifestyles that lighten their carbon footprint. Why not? Many of us live compartmentalized lives. Cut off from the natural world and its processes, we don’t always see the big picture. We don’t see the extent of the problem and the part we play in solving it. And we don’t realize that everything we need to survive comes from the world God

gave us.

Or we may find ourselves at the other end of the spectrum—overwhelmed. The world’s vast problems intimidate us into believing that we can’t make the changes we need to make. This leads to apathy, a sinful attitude that completely discounts the power of God in community. Fear isn’t the answer. Environmental scientist Calvin DeWitt has written, “Gloom and doom are not necessary components of the message about caring for creation. Frightening ourselves into action is far less preferable than caring for creation of our gratitude and love for God.” Sometimes, though, fear can be justified. “As for being called an alarmist,” DeWitt writes, “is it wrong to sound the fire alarm when a building is burning? In many cases today it may be necessary to sound the alarm.”

So what does taking the leap look like? My church just started a recycling program for what I call “troublesome trash,” the household hazardous waste that sometimes gets discarded in regular trash. We have a collection center for old batteries, CFL light bulbs, household chemicals, and other toxic substances. We’re starting to recycle our weekly paper bulletins and to give serious thought to discontinuing plastic tableware at our church dinners. It’s a start—a leap—toward loving God by loving the creation he’s given us. ■

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