

The summer before I turned 13, my grandparents celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary by taking my family on a trip to Alaska. The experience was overwhelming. We took in breath-taking views of snow-capped mountains, watched a brown bear family play on the edge of a river, marveled as mountain goats pranced effortlessly up steep cliffs. I vividly remember sitting in a tour bus when an enormous moose trotted by the window. We saw bald eagles in flight, dolphins dancing in the waves, whales breaching and I even got to touch an iceberg. I remember coming back home to Phoenix in the middle of the hot desert summer feeling awe-struck by the immensity of what I had experienced.

Less than a year later, an Exxon oil tanker slammed into a reef in Prince William Sound and 11 million gallons of oil gushed into the pristine waters. I was heartbroken as I watched footage of pelicans, sea otters, and turtles covered in black goo being washed one at a time. Even as a young teen, I knew that for every creature that was saved, certainly there were many who were not so lucky. I knew that the sludge in the water would devastate sea life for decades. I knew that even the best efforts to clean up this disaster couldn't reach inch of shoreline or wash every feather. While this was not the first time I had considered humanity's impact on the planet, it was the first time I had witnessed human-created devastation on such a massive scale in a place that I loved. It was also the first time that I truly understood that God's creation, the plants, the critters, the oceans, cannot advocate for itself. Creation needs us to take responsibility for the damage we are doing and it needs us to knock it off. Creation is waiting for each one of us to wake up and realize that our actions and our lack of action, is causing a destruction that we may not be able to undo.

While oil spills are devastating to the environment, they are only a symptom of our biggest problem – our reliance on fossil fuels. Humanity's use of coal, oil, and even natural gas as our primary source of energy has led to drastic changes in the planet's climate that, if we don't drastically change our habits quickly, will be irreversible in my lifetime.

What does that change need to look like? This change needs to be much, much bigger than household recycling and switching our lightbulbs to compact fluorescent bulbs, although individual actions are certainly important. The change we need is not only what we should do, but what we shouldn't do. Environmental activist, author and co-founder of the

organization 350.org Bill McKibben coined the term “Keep it in the Ground.” This term refers to the fact that if we are to prevent an irreparable shift in our planet’s climate, we have to keep 80% of the fossil fuel reserves that know about underground.¹ That means leaving the oil undrilled, the gas un-fracked and the coal un-mined. Until about 5 years ago, “keeping it in the ground” was a new idea. McKibben reminds us that until recently, when environmentalists talked about climate policy, the focus was on reducing demand. Things like changing lightbulbs to CFLs, carpooling or taking public transit, and at the government level the focus was on carbon taxes. And while these are all important ideas, in the last few years scientists have come to understand that this is not enough. If we are truly going to avoid a climate disaster, we must leave 80% of the fossil fuels in the ground.

As you might imagine, the major barrier to making “Keep It in the Ground” a reality is money. McKibben writes that if all of the known fossil fuel reserves were utilized, they could be worth as much as \$20 trillion or more. People who make their money by refining and selling this fuels are not going to willingly walk away from that kind of cash. It is easy to feel hopeless and powerless against the fossil fuel industry and tycoons like the Koch brothers who plan to spend upwards of \$900 million this year to make every effort to get candidates elected who will allow them to exploit the planet and increase their fortunes. And yet, progress is already being made.

McKibben writes “If you understand the logic of the Keep It in the Ground campaign, for instance, then you understand the logic of the Keystone pipeline fight. Pundits said it was “just one pipeline,” but efforts to block it meant that the expansion of Canada’s tar sands suddenly, sharply slowed. Investors, unsure that there would ever be affordable ways to bring more of that oil to market, pulled tens of billions of dollars off the table, even before the price of oil began to fall. So far, only about 3 percent of the oil in those tar sands has been extracted; the bomb is still sitting there, and if we block pipelines, then we cut the fuse.”

¹ “Why We Need to Keep 80 Percent of Fossil Fuels in the Ground” by Bill McKibben. *Yes Magazine* February 15, 2016.

Divestment in fossil fuels is also gaining traction. The gospel of Matthew states that “where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (Matthew 6:21) investing money in companies that profit from the fossil fuel industry is incompatible with fighting against climate change. In 2012 Unity College of Maine was the first institution to divest by selling all the fossil fuel stock in its portfolio. Larger institutions followed suit including Stanford and Oxford. In 2013, the United Church of Christ became the first Christian denomination to pass a resolution of divesting from fossil fuels. More and more denominations are breaking their ties with fossil fuel companies including the Church of England and the Episcopal church.

Divestment is critical piece of the puzzle, and political pressure is another. We have allowed the people who represent us to care more about money they get from the fossil fuel industry than the future of the human race. We need to make our voices heard and hold our representatives accountable.

This may all feel a bit undoable. But Bill McKibben says there is good news. He writes the following:

“...it’s beginning to look like we don’t need to win this fight forever. That’s because alternatives to fossil fuel are becoming cheaper with every passing day. The price of a solar panel has fallen more than 70 percent in the last six years. That’s a mortal threat to the hydrocarbon tycoons. They know that they have to get new infrastructure in place in the next few years. If they can build those pipelines and mines, then for the next 40 or 50 years they’ll be able to get carbon out cheaply enough to compete (and to wreck the planet). If they can’t—if we can hold them off for just a few more years—then we’ll have made the transition to clean energy irreversible.”

Creation is waiting for us to take action, but it can’t wait forever. Creation is waiting for us care as much about the planet as we do about the fate of Lord Grantham or who’s allowed to use which bathroom. We are the ones Creation is waiting for - you and me; young and old; Republican, Democrat or Independent... Creation is waiting for us.