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Giving thanks for Planet Earth

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NCR Today

This week, we might take a minute to thank God for Planet Earth: the mountains, valleys and plains, the oceans, lakes and rivers, the vast expanses of forest, green fields and wildlife. For it's not clear how much longer Planet Earth will be with us in the form that we know it. The seas are warming and increasingly acidic; the polar ice cap is melting; weather is becoming ever more erratic. And the reason is climate change caused by excessive carbon emissions in the atmosphere.

On Sunday, I went to hear Bill McKibben, leader of 350.org, lay out the stark reality of climate change in numbers that should scare any thinking person. It was part of his nationwide "Do the Math" tour. The bottom line? We must avoid an increase of 2 degrees Celsius in the earth's atmosphere if we have any hope of saving Planet Earth as we know it. That is the *consensus* of scientists worldwide. And the earth's temperature has already gone up 1 degree Celsius, and the polar ice cap is melting.

The math is this: We can burn no more than 565 gigatons of carbon-based fuel if we are stay below that 2-degree marker. But there are five times that many gigatons (2,795 to be exact) in reserve, waiting to be burned. And the fossil fuel industry (oil, coal, natural gas) is looking for more (under the sea, in shale formations in the earth, anywhere), and they intend to burn it.

As McKibben put it, they are now a rogue industry. "Now, we want to put them -- in the public mind -- in the same place where big tobacco is right now." In other words, make them a pariah industry.

Many people have told McKibben that this is a David vs. Goliath kind of struggle. "But," McKibben says, "I am a Methodist Sunday school teacher, and I know how that story ends." David, against all odds, beats Goliath with a slingshot.

But how? What is McKibben's slingshot?

On answer: a divestment campaign. Using the divestment campaign against apartheid in South Africa as a model, 350.org plans a major push to get as many institutions as possible (colleges, universities, pension funds, religious orders, etc.) to divest from fossil fuel industries.

There are also signs of hope, especially in Germany and the Scandinavian countries, where there have been serious efforts to convert to solar and other forms of renewable energy for decades. Germany, while not exactly a "solar" paradise, is reporting now that it has exceeded its goals for renewable energy conversion. If Germany can do it, so can we, and so can China, and Western Europe as a whole, and all the other nations gobbling up fossil fuels.

So this Thanksgiving Day, I give thanks to God for Planet Earth. But I also give thanks for Bill McKibben and his allies, for the climate scientists who have led the way, for the activists who have put their bodies on the line to save the planet. We will all need to join them in some way if we can continue to give thanks for the planet in coming years.

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