

The K.F. Stone Weekly

(Formerly "Beating the Bushes")



September 20, 2015

LAUDATO SI

This week's essay is adapted from my sermon for Kol Nidre -- the evening service for Yom Kippur -- which will be delivered this coming Tuesday. For nearly 4 decades it has been my custom that at the time of Kol Nidre, I address G-d directly, while the congregation eavesdrops . . .

Hello G-d. Unbelievably, it's that time of year again -- *Kol Nidre*, where, for the past 36 years I have taken the opportunity to speak to you while a congregation eavesdrops. I find it nothing short of amazing -- and more than a bit daunting -- that this is the 36th year -- twice *chai* -- that I have availed myself of this



opportunity. Whoever it was first noted that the longer it goes, the faster time flies, was speaking an awesome truth. I mean, the year between this *Kol Nidre* and last seems to have arrived so much faster than in the past. Each birthday, each anniversary comes around so much more quickly than in the past. It doesn't seem all that long ago that I had to get used to being called "Rabbi." It was 5739 and I was a mere 30 years of age. Today,

in what seems to be the mere blink of an eye, I have become what used to be known as a "senior citizen." Heck, my very first Social Security check is going to be automatically deposited into my on-line bank account in about 12 hours. At this point we should cue up Sandy Denny's song *Who Knows Where the Time Goes?* from Fairport Convention's 1968 album *Unhalfbricking*, which contains the lyric:

*Across the evening sky all the birds are leaving
But how can they know it's time for them to go?
Before the winter fire, I will still be dreaming.
I have no thought of time.
For who knows where the time goes?
Who knows where the time goes?*

My goodness, even these words are now nearly a half-century old and Sandy Denny herself has been gone for nearly 40 years. Where *does* the time go?

So, our Jewish calendar now reads 5776. And of course, dear G-d, few - if indeed any - of us believe that the world was created so recently. For us, 5776 is far more a literary device within the realm of Jewish history than anything approaching or approximating a declaration of scientific truth. Oh yes, dear G-d, there are, amazingly, lots of people out there who actually believe the world is but a couple of thousand years old. Precisely how they come to this conclusion -- and how they make this jibe with all the datable evidence provided by prehistoric fossils -- is well beyond me. The fact that there are people out there who firmly believe that Noah's ark included dinosaurs really blows my mind. Then too, there are others who deny there were ever any such creatures as Ichthyosaurs, Stegosaurus, Triceratops, or Tyrannosaurus Rex to name but a few. For if they had actually existed and walked the earth, these people claim, they would have been mentioned in the Bible. No reference; no reality. And unbelievably, some of the people holding fast to this breathtaking bit of anti-intellectual gobbledygook are actually serving in elective office! And several of them are currently running for president of the United States.

Dear G-d, I know you've created an enormous universe that has room for all kinds of people with all kinds of beliefs. But tell me the truth: don't some of these folks try even your patience? I mean, how can you abide by all those in positions of power who prefer blind -- not to mention deaf and dumb -- faith to scientific truth? Who firmly believe -- or at least claim they believe -- that there is no such thing as man-made climate change? That melting permafrost, devastating drought and historically destructive tsunamis -- to name but a few current cataclysms -- are all part of your divine will; that they have virtually nothing to do with human action? How can you stand such blatant lunacy? Doesn't it try your patience to the point where even you are rethinking the wisdom of having created humankind -- the so-called "crown of creation?"

I am by no means the first to ask this question of You . . . of what You do when humanity's lunatic fringe begins taking center stage and making a mockery of the very world You created. Of how you keep from throwing Your celestial hands up in disgust and proclaiming "do what you will with the universe . . .

you deserve the folly of your pigheadedness." Yes, I know that according to the rabbis of old, whenever You get to the point of seriously considering permitting us to destroy ourselves, You assuage your anger and impatience by concentrating on a handful of blessed souls whose world view, whose kindness, saintliness and magnanimity of spirit makes You feel that perhaps -- just perhaps -- there's hope for the planet. According to the rabbis of old, there were and are precisely 36 such souls at any given time -- the so-called *lamed-vav* -- and furthermore, that You are the only one who of a certainty could identify them. Well, dear G-d, I certainly lay no claim to having the slightest idea of who any of them are, but I'd lay a pretty stiff bet that Pope Francis might well be one of 'em. I mean here is this truly humble, spiritually robust man of the people -- born Jorge Mario Bergoglio -- who believes with every fibre of his being that we are placed here upon this earth to do justice, love mercy and walk with utmost humility.

From day one, this Argentine-born priest has made it his mission to feed the hungry, free the captive and bring hope to the hopeless. Moreover, he is standing tall for the earth You have created; preaching about how much harm we have done to Your earth and how we must all unite in restoring it to full health. Unlike many so-called "leaders," he does *not* begin his speeches with the words "I am not a scientist . . ." and then proceed to make it abundantly clear that he rejects science itself. No, he travels the globe pointing out what is obvious to anyone not practicing willful blindness: that the earth is fast approaching a point of no return; that unless and until we reverse course and institute major fundamental changes in the way we heat and cool, we fund and fuel, we are dooming ourselves and our tiny planet to extinction.

In his recent encyclical on the state of our planet's health -- [*Laudato Si*](#) -- which is Latin for either "Praised be" or "Be Praised" -- Pope Francis calls for an "ecological conversion" for the faithful. In it, he warns of harming birds and speaks of industrial waste; he calls for renewable fuel subsidies and energy efficiency.

Among other things covered in *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis writes:

Climate change has grave implications:

"Each year sees the disappearance of thousands of plant and animal species which we will never know, which our children will never see, because they have been lost forever."

Rich countries are destroying poor ones and the earth is getting warmer:

"The warming caused by huge consumption on the part of some rich countries has repercussions on the poorest areas of the world, especially Africa, where a rise in temperature, together with drought, has proved devastating for farming."

Christians have misinterpreted Scripture . . .

and *"must forcefully reject the notion that our being created in God's image and given dominion over the earth justifies absolute domination over other creatures."*

The importance of access to safe drinkable water is

"a basic and universal human right."

Population control does not address the problems of the poor:

"In the face of the so-called culture of death, the family is the heart of the culture of life." And, "Since everything is interrelated, concern for the protection of nature is also incompatible with the justification of abortion."

The international community has not acted enough:

"Recent World Summits on the environment have not lived up to expectations because, due to lack of political will, they were unable to reach truly meaningful and effective global agreements on the environment. The Church does not presume to settle scientific questions or to replace politics. But I am concerned to encourage an honest and open debate so that particular interests or ideologies will not prejudice the common good." And, "there is urgent need of a true world political authority, as my predecessor Blessed John XXIII indicated some years ago."

Individuals must act:

"An integral ecology is also made up of simple daily gestures which break with the logic of violence, exploitation and selfishness," he writes. "We should also consider taking public transit, car-pooling, planting trees, turning off the lights and recycling."

By the way, why are we here on Earth in the first place?

"What kind of world do we want to leave to those who come after us, to children who are now growing up?" he writes.

As intelligent and obvious as these points are, there are those already attacking the Holy Father for having the temerity to involve himself in what some are referring to as "liberal politics." Believe it or not a number of members of Congress -- at least one of whom is a practicing Catholic -- have announced that they will boycott his speech this coming Thursday. One of them, Arizona Representative Paul Gosar (photo at right) - a practicing Catholic - is a



leading climate change denier. In [an article](#) he published the other day explaining his decision to boycott the Pope's address to a Joint Session of Congress, Gosar wrote "*The earth's climate has been changing since God created it, with or without man. On that, we should all agree...If the Pope wants to devote his life to fighting climate change then he can do so in his personal time. But to promote questionable science as Catholic dogma is ridiculous...When the Pope chooses to act and talk like a leftist politician, then he can expect to be treated like one.*"

This stunning display of disrespect toward Pope Francis from an elected official - and especially one who is a Catholic one to boot -- shows a profound ignorance about the church's teachings when it comes to the stewardship of creation. From what I understand, the Pope -- ANY Pope -- is endowed with a little something called "Papal infallibility." The *Catholic Encyclopedia* notes that *infallibility means more than exemption from actual error; it means exemption from the possibility of error*" In boycotting Pope Francis' speech, Rep. Gosar isn't merely disrespecting the teachings of his religious leader; he is denying a key historic dogma of his church . . .

And so, dear G-d, on this *Kol Nidre* 5776, I appreciate your listening to me, and pray that this New Year will see Pope Francis' sermon heeded by millions upon millions of people the world over. For as is written in the 24th Psalm:

לַיהוָה הָאָרֶץ וּמְלוּכָהּ תִּבְלֵל וַיֵּשְׁבֵי בָהּ

כִּי הוּא עַל-יַמִּים יִסְדָּהּ וְעַל-נְהָרוֹת יִכּוֹנְנָהּ

"*The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof; the world and they that dwell therein. For He has founded it upon the seas and established it upon the floods.*"

May we, in the coming year, do everything in our power to affect repair of this fragile orb.

For when all is said and done, *this* is humanity's supreme challenge.

Amen

Copyright©2015 Kurt F. Stone