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**FOLLOWING
JESUS
IN A
WARMING
WORLD**

A CHRISTIAN CALL
TO CLIMATE ACTION



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COAL AND THE GREATEST COMMANDMENT

WE MET AT A GAS STATION off the county highway at sunrise. There was no mistaking which pickup truck was his. It was plastered with bumper stickers that carried phrases like “Friends of the Mountains,” “I Love Mountains,” and “Topless Mountains are Obscene.” If any doubt remained, it was quickly dispelled when he hopped out of the driver’s seat to greet our group. All of five feet tall, with his signature faded overalls and straw brim hat, Larry Gibson was one of a kind.

It helped that our group knew who to look for. Larry’s reputation preceded him. Inspired by the likes of Larry and others, our small group of a dozen or so college students from Grand Rapids, Michigan, had decided to trek to the hollers of West Virginia and to spend our spring break not on some sandy Gulf Coast beach but in the coal fields of Appalachia. We were there to serve in whatever imperfect and halting ways we could, but mostly we were there to learn, to bear witness, and to lament. We had come to rural West Virginia to experience the practice of mountaintop-removal coal mining.

Mountaintop-removal coal mining is a particularly harmful form of strip mining that consists of clear-cutting large swaths of old-growth Appalachian forests from the top of mountain ridges. In much of Appalachia these are some of the oldest forests in the world. Once the trees are cut and cleared, holes are bored at intervals into the mountain crust and dynamite is planted deep in the heart of the mountain. The

dynamite is then exploded, erasing up to six hundred feet of ancient elevation in an instant. The rubble that's left behind, called "overburden" in industry jargon, is then cleared away.

Thanks to a 2002 change to the Clean Water Act, this waste is officially classified in the same category as soil and dirt, allowing the mining companies to simply push the mix of rubble, ash, and toxic heavy metals off the side of the mountain into the streams and rivers below. Since this rule change, this "valley fill" has buried more than two thousand miles of headwater streams and polluted many more.¹ All of this in order to access thin seams of coal so near the mountain's surface that traditional deep-well mining can't get at it.

These coal seams are marginal. Before technology advanced to the point where they could be harvested, they would simply be left alone. Because of this, the profit margins for mountaintop-removal operators are tight. That's why mountaintop-removal sites employ one worker for every eleven workers employed at traditional deep-well mining sites. Like the perennial push to develop the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge—established by a Republican president in 1960, expanded by a Democratic president in 1980, and meant to serve as a guardrail for our collective craving for cheap oil and gas—the practice of mountaintop removal has the feeling of a drug user working harder and harder to get a fix. Our collective addiction has driven us to ever more extreme behavior. As with other addictions, the collateral damage of our singular drive to score is profound.

We had come to see Larry because Larry understood the logical conclusion of this kind of runaway addiction, and he had committed his life to putting a stop to it. By the time we met him in Kayford, West Virginia, on a chilly, fog-filled day in the spring of 2012, the consequences of our addiction to cheap coal were everywhere. Mountaintop removal had scarred thousands of square miles of Appalachian landscape, displaced neighbors who had called now-buried Appalachian hollers home for generations, and poisoned countless neighbors living downstream. We had read about it. We had watched documentaries about it. We had

discussed it as a group ad nauseam. Now Larry was going to help us see it with our own eyes.

Gravel crunched under Larry's tires and fog swirled in the headlight beams as we inched our way up the steep access road to Larry's cabin. I tried not to think about the sheer cliff face inches from the passenger side tires, made all the more menacing by its camouflage of thick fog. I looked over at Larry, who was completely at ease traversing the treacherous mountainside. To take my mind off my proximity to certain death should Larry's hand slip from his steering wheel, I listened to the police scanner mounted on the inside of Larry's windshield. Chatter filled the cabin in blips and chirps. My ear, unaccustomed to the distorted words carried to us on the wind, had a hard time following much of it. One word, though, was uttered so frequently that I began to pick it up.

"Who's Stickers?" I asked Larry.

"Me," he replied. "That's their nickname for my truck. They're tracking us."

Larry explained that the voices crackling through the scanner belonged to a handful of men who had been hired by the coal company in town. Like many of the mountains surrounding Larry, shallow veins of coal crisscrossed the mountain on which Larry's home sat. When these were discovered, the local coal company went about purchasing the mineral rights from the inhabitants of the mountain in order to blow it apart—to tap the coal seams and bleed the mountain of its precious payload. One by one, Larry's neighbors sold their rights and moved off the mountain.

Not all the residents of Kayford Mountain wanted to sell. When the coal company failed to entice them with larger and larger carrots, they resorted to using sticks to drive them off their land. Intimidation campaigns harassed neighbors until, frustrated and frazzled, they sold their rights and escaped the abuse. By the time we visited Larry, he was the last holdout. The full force of the intimidation campaign was now trained exclusively on him.

“Maybe he’ll drive off the edge this time,” chirped a voice from the scanner.

“Fingers crossed,” crackled the reply.

Larry’s cabin finally loomed out of the fog as we reached the mountain summit. It bore signs reading “We are the Defenders of the Mountains” and other paraphernalia from his decades-long fight on behalf of his and others’ homes. Welcoming us inside, he showed us the bullet holes left by his intimidators. “Sometimes they get drunk and like to come have a laugh,” he explained. As if to prove beyond doubt what had caused the holes, he showed us the bullet casings he had collected over the years.

After warming ourselves by his wood-fired stove, we set out on foot for the main event, the reason we had come to see Larry: a mountain ridge not far from Larry’s cabin that offered a panoramic view of a mountaintop-removal mining operation on the mountain next door. As we walked the steadily inclining path to the ridge, our feet kicked and stumbled over coal seams so close to the surface that they looked like black tree roots. Larry shared stories of Kayford Mountain with us as we walked: neighbors long since moved away, property long since sold off. He told us about Kayford Cemetery—home to generations of revered patriarchs, quirky uncles, beloved mothers and grandmothers—now buried under the rubble of a neighboring mountaintop-removal operation and unreachable by those relatives who still lived and who ached to visit those sleeping beneath the dust and debris. He spoke of Kayford Mountain as a beloved.

Suddenly, Larry threw out his arm like a parent stopping short at a red light. We had reached the ridge. The fog that had surrounded us on our summit up the mountain still hung like a veil across the expanse between us and what we had come to see. Pictures had primed us for what to expect: inert, neatly terraced earth rather than sloping, vibrant mountainside rising to the sky. We were prepared to encounter a pallet of drab grays and browns where once there was wild, vivid green; a broken and scarred moonscape sprawling across hundreds of acres of decimated ecosystem.

I saw none of it. I saw only a thick blanket of fog pressing in on all sides. Larry, perhaps sensing our disappointment, instructed us, “Forget your eyes. Use your ears.” I listened hard. I heard absolutely nothing, no cacophony of birds calling to one another from the branches of Appalachia’s old-growth pines, no abundance of life that should have been pulsing to us like an electric current across the expanse. Instead, I heard the vast emptiness left by the thousands of feet of ancient elevation now leveled forever. I heard nothing out of the void. Nothing at all. I never knew silence could be so deafening.

Our visit with Larry comprised just one of our seven days in Kermit, West Virginia, and the nuns who hosted us kept us busy. We accompanied Sister Kathy on her weekly trip down the mountain to the local school where she volunteered and heard one teacher tell us, “If you ask any of these kids what they want to do when they grow up, each one of them will tell you the same thing: mine coal. It’s all they know.”

We visited the neighbors on the mountain where the nuns lived, helping to split wood and sipping iced tea on front porches. We listened as wives told us about their husbands’ inoperable tumors and how much time they had left. A mother recalled the latest trip into Charleston to treat her eleven-year-old daughter’s ovarian cancer—a reality for countless people downwind and downriver from mining operations in coal country. The nuns would comfort and pray for their neighbors while we looked on, intruders on the community grief.

We were hosted for a day by the coal company that mined the region surrounding the nun’s mountain (not the same company terrorizing Larry). They welcomed us into their spacious conference room, and while we ate a catered breakfast, they shared with pride and conviction how they and the people of the area had partnered for decades to keep America’s lights on. We donned hard hats and reflector vests and descended into a deep-well mine. We piled into pickup trucks to see a “reclamation site”—a retired mountaintop-removal mining site with spotty patches of scrubby grass, which the coal company reps tried to convince us was just as good as it was before they had blown it all to

smithereens. After dropping us off at our cars at the end of the day, one of the reps said, “I hope this helped give you some appreciation for the good that coal has done.” Driving away, I guessed that our suspicion of them had not been well hidden.

We helped at a food drive at a small country church nestled in a nearby holler. The growth of machine-driven mountaintop-removal mining in the region and the inexorable decline of the coal industry meant there was no shortage of need. Out of work and underemployed coal miners lined up to receive their food with defiance, shame, and resilience mingled on their faces. Volunteers handed out boxes of food alongside us. When the rush had diminished, we sat down with a few of the volunteers and the pastor of the church, all of them previous coal miners themselves. We shared about our experience and what we had learned over the course of the week. We talked about cancer and bullet holes, police scanners and economic despair. The people of the holler, explained the pastor, all had ties to coal. If they didn’t mine it, their daddy or their granddaddy had. Coal mining was their heritage, their livelihood, their identity. We left with the distinct impression that though the pastor and volunteers sympathized with Larry’s plight, his was a story they had heard all too often. To them, Larry’s predicament was simply the unfortunate yet necessary cost of business. “After all,” the pastor said to us toward the end of our time together, “God gave us the coal to bless us. He wants us to use it!” His tone made it clear that, at least for him, this settled the matter completely.

Coal and the Greatest Commandment

In the Gospels, Jesus is asked, “What is the greatest commandment?” Depending on the Gospel account, the questioner is a Pharisee (Matthew 22:36), a scribe (Mark 12:28), or a lawyer (Luke 10:25). In other words, a religious insider with intimate knowledge of the commandments himself. According to Matthew and Luke, the question is intended as a test. It’s easy to see why. In Jesus’ day, there were more than six hundred recognized commandments found in the Hebrew

Scriptures, and there were various Jewish sects that interpreted these commandments differently.

The Sadducees tended to interpret them broadly and attempted to contextualize them to a world where they found themselves under the thumb of capricious Roman occupying forces. The Zealots applied the Law in the context of their occupation in a way opposite to the Sadducees. Whereas the Sadducees cozied up to the Romans in order to secure for themselves some modicum of control and autonomy, the Zealots sought to violently overthrow Roman forces through guerrilla warfare, assassination, and violent uprisings. The Essenes, privileging the commands to be a holy and set apart people, separated themselves entirely from society, founding communities in the wilderness, where they pursued purity and holiness together.

The Pharisees were, by most accounts, the most legalistic of the sects and had even created what's been called a "fence around the Law," a complex system of countless additional rules and regulations as insulation for the original, God-given commands. The theory was that even if they broke one of these extracanonical rules (e.g., exceeding a maximum number of allowable steps on the Sabbath), they would still be able to keep the actual commandment found in the Torah ("Everyone is to stay where they are on the seventh day; no one is to go out," Exodus 16:29). This system of auxiliary rules gave rise to complicated taxonomies and split various schools of thought about how best to organize, rank, and privilege them. Rabbis offered differing opinions, splitting the Pharisees into opposing philosophical camps.

The question put to Jesus in the Gospel account is dripping with cultural, social, and political baggage. Jesus' questioner is essentially forcing him to take a side, guaranteeing that he will alienate at least one faction of his listeners. "Which school of thought do you subscribe to, Jesus? Which tribe is yours? Team Rabbi Hillel or Team Rabbi Gamaliel?" It isn't hard to recognize the same kind of binary thinking at play in our own context today. Wherever we turn, we hear similar questions put to

us when it comes to climate change: Which camp are you in? Skeptic or believer? Liberal or conservative? Blue or red?

Tragically, this kind of dualistic thinking seems just as prevalent in the church as anywhere else in society. An ingrained sense of moral certitude in the midst of a complicated world seems to be the inheritance for those of us who grew up in late-twentieth-century evangelical culture indelibly shaped by the religious right. Questions of right and wrong, biblical and “worldly,” were easily discernible to those appropriately submitted to the gospel. In a political, religious, and social world shaped by certainty, moral nuance is often flattened out into clear-cut answers of right and wrong. Ambiguity is not merely a nuisance but a threat to a worldview that asserts that the Bible and its intentions are straightforward and that moral behavior is self-evident. Complexity is ignored and discernment is discouraged in favor of strict moral directives. Dos and don’ts dominate the believer’s moral imagination.

That’s why Jesus’ answer to this question is such a gift. He refuses to take the bait. He refuses to accept the binary terms of the question and instead offers something that is at once simple and deeply profound: love God and love your neighbor. That’s it. There are no complex legal categorizations or hierarchies, no endorsement of one camp over another. Instead, what he provides is a radically faithful distillation of discipleship. The entirety of our response to the story of God’s saving work in the world, says Jesus, can be summed up like this: love God with everything you’ve got, and love your neighbor as if their present circumstances and future prospects were your own.

How refreshing it is for us as followers of Jesus living in a polarized age to see this kind of creative resistance from Jesus, to see him refuse to play by the rules of zero-sum tribalism and instead chart a third way forward rooted in love and grounded in God’s Word. When it comes to climate change (and any other pressing social, economic, or political issue), we can feel enormous pressure to choose a side. We feel we need to align with one group over against another. There is pressure to flatten out the complexity and nuance of climate action by mashing it together

with a whole host of other policy positions privileged by one political party or the other.

What a gift Jesus offers to us, then. A clarifying lens that transcends petty games of us versus them, that frees our imaginations from the shackles of zero-sum politics, and that reminds us that love is our highest calling and that in God's economy of abundance, there is plenty to go around.

After all, how can we love our neighbors well if we remain silent in the face of circumstances that threaten their livelihoods and poison their bodies? How can we tell our brothers and sisters in Christ, "I believe you," when they describe the ways that climate change is harming them and their families, and then do nothing to try to change their circumstances? How can we love our neighbors without fighting for their right to clean air and water, and a safe and stable world where they can flourish and thrive? How can we be pro-life in a warming world if we ignore the myriad ways in which climate change endangers and extinguishes life?

The Bible has a word for the kind of faith that sees the suffering of its neighbors and does nothing to respond: dead (James 2:17).



All the people I met and the stories I heard on that trip to West Virginia complicated my perspective. I had gone fully convinced of the horrors of mountaintop-removal mining and of the need to transition away from fossil fuels as quickly as possible. My time with Larry, my up close and visceral experience of mountaintop-removal mining, the stories of pre-teens losing their hair from chemotherapy, and the long lines of abandoned coal workers had confirmed my belief. I had been ready for that.

What I hadn't been ready for was the pride with which people spoke about coal mining and their role in powering America. I hadn't been ready for the sparkle in the eyes of the school kids who spoke animatedly about the day they would be old enough to join their parents in the

mines. I hadn't been ready for the desperate economic reality that held the communities we visited in a stranglehold. As one local told me, "If you ain't working in the coal mines, you're working at the Dairy Queen."

In some ways, my strident certitude about the immorality of fossil fuels had been chastened. It was complicated. People's lives were wrapped up in fossil fuel extraction, transportation, and distribution. Human faces now swam across my vision when I considered concepts such as mountaintop removal, environmental justice, and a just transition away from fossil fuels toward cleaner alternatives.

Yet, as empathy began to soften my outlook, my moral clarity was being hardened. Pride in the role that Appalachia has played in driving the Industrial Revolution and bringing millions of people out of poverty over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries can be celebrated. We can honor the contributions that fossil fuels have made to American prosperity and well-being without giving fossil fuels a free pass in perpetuity. We can acknowledge both that coal has unlocked tremendous economic growth and that it is simultaneously endangering that growth by driving dangerous climate change. We can recognize that coal has put food on millions of American tables *and* poisoned the drinking water. Both can be true at the same time.

I often see the faces of Larry, the nuns, those out-of-work coal miners, and so many others I've met throughout the years. I carry them with me. I do this partly because I promised to—I promised to tell their stories to anyone who would listen. Mostly, though, I recall these faces because I can't help it. Larry's wide-brimmed hat, the nuns' generous spirit, those kids' sheepish smiles—I couldn't shake them if I tried.

And I wouldn't want to try. Each one is a gift. Each story is a kind of sacrament, a physical manifestation of an invisible grace. I don't want to forget the tenacity and fierce righteousness of Larry's cause in the face of gross injustice, the strength it takes a mother to tell the traumatic medical history of her young daughter to a group of total strangers, and the resilience of an entire community in the grip of economic despair. All of it holds out to me truths about God's character and about the

shape of our collective calling to follow after Jesus in whatever world we may find ourselves—even, and perhaps especially, a warming one.

All of it is a reminder that the partisan rancor, the esoteric legislative jargon, the layers of bureaucracy, and the impenetrable technological minutiae that make up the constellation of actions necessary to stave off climate catastrophe are only part of the picture of Christian climate action. Underneath all of it are people, just people. People who are living, breathing image-bearers of God doing their best to stay alive, to stay healthy, and to keep safe the ones they love.

Larry and the others whose stories I carry in my heart are a sacramental reminder of the holy formula that creation care equals people care. They are a living, breathing reminder that to be pro-life in a warming world requires that we be actively, aggressively anti-climate change. They are reminders that the way we live and move and have our being on the earth directly impacts others' ability to do the same. When we receive these sacramental gifts with the ethical posture of love held out to us by Jesus, suddenly the petty partisan nonsense that so often surrounds discussion about climate change falls away. In its place is a radically simple question: Will we love?

Larry Gibson died of a heart attack in 2012, mere months after our visit. He died with his beloved Kayford Mountain still in desperate danger. I think of him often, and all the other people I met in West Virginia. I think about the teachers at Kermit Area School, trying their best to keep their students fed, clothed, cared for, and, if there was still time, reading at grade level. I think about the neighbors fighting pediatric cancer and Black Lung Disease. I think about the mining executives doing all they could to maximize profit for their shareholders, and the miners themselves who swelled with pride at the mention of powering America. I think about the country pastor and the food pantry volunteers, sympathetic to Larry's plight but resigned to it as a necessary cost of powering the economic engine of America. I have no doubt that love motivated many of them: love for their students, love for their work,

love for their church, and love for the neighbors they could touch and see and hand a box of food to.

But I can't help wondering: What if love could have done more for Larry? What if rather than a realpolitik pragmatism or a resigned fatalism, mountaintop-removal coal mining in Larry's community were seen first and foremost through the lens of love? What if it could be seen through the lens of what neighbors owe to each other, of what we owe to the world that sustains us, of what we owe to the Creator who calls it all good?

If the creative, third-way love of Jesus were our ethical lens, I think Larry might have died differently. Rather than isolated and alone in his fight, with bullet holes in his cabin, he might have been assured and at peace that his fight for Kayford would carry on without him. Maybe the theology of the pastor we met would have been shaped less by the prevailing economic and political forces benefiting from the abuse of the land around him and more by a vision of love and protection for God's creation. Maybe he could have recognized the birds, the mountains, the streams, Larry, and all the people negatively affected by the company's practices as objects of the love to which Jesus calls us and could have acted out of that love rather than rationalizing the problem away. Maybe after handing out boxes of food, he and his volunteers would have driven the short distance to Kayford to stand alongside Larry in his fight for dignity for himself and for the mountain that he loved and called home.

What if Christians across the United States were increasingly formed, week after week, into people who saw the created world not as inert raw material meant for nothing more than powering our industrial machines but as the Creator's masterpiece, shot through with the glory of God, with a destiny of its own in God's coming good future? In other words, what if US Christians were formed to love God's world and to love the people who depend on it for their survival? Then maybe the local churches surrounding Kayford Mountain would have protected Larry from the harassment he suffered. Maybe they would have

protected the mountains surrounding Kayford that had already been toppled. Maybe Christians across the country would have known Larry's story and would have marched in the streets and knocked down the doors of Congress demanding a stop to the abuse. Maybe even today, years after Larry's death, Christians would be exerting persistent pressure on corporations to find alternative means of energy production that treat humans like Larry and the rest of creation with dignity and respect. Maybe they would be leading the charge to transform all of humanity's relationship to the created world by protecting endangered species, eliminating dangerous pollutants, and stopping climate change in its tracks.

If the American church had been formed by this kind of interpretation of Jesus' command to love God and our neighbors alike, maybe Larry could have died differently. Maybe he could have been surrounded by neighbors long since driven out. He might have had the sound of hymns in his ears sung by members of the local church standing guard at his door. He could have known that his kinship with Kayford Mountain was not an isolated relationship but was shared by Christians the world over in all their varied, wild, and beautiful places.

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