

The Truth, the Whole Truth, and Nothing but the Truth?

This summer, my spouse Matthew and I went on our belated honeymoon to Alaska. It's a place I had always wanted to visit, and it was every bit as spectacular as I had hoped. One of the reasons that I particularly wanted to go when we did, however, is a sad one. I knew that the



glaciers are melting rapidly due to climate change, and I wanted to see them while they were still there. On one particular trip to a glacier, we had an unexpected encounter.

We had just arrived at the town of Seward that morning, and we took a cab to get to Exit Glacier in Kenai Fjords National Park. Our cab driver was a friendly guy, and we schmoozed with him

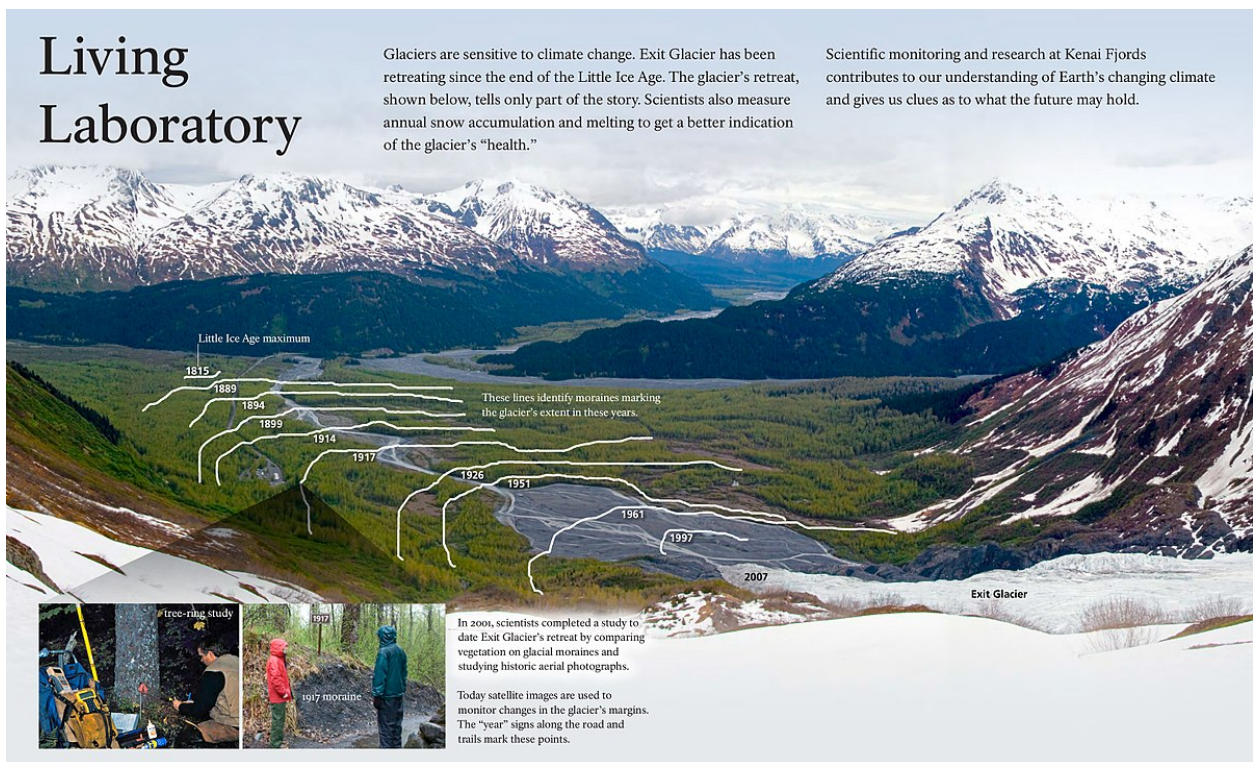
during the drive. As we drove along, long before we reached the visitor's center, we started seeing signposts with four digit numbers on them. The numbers indicated a year, and the posts were placed to show where the edge of the glacier had reached that



year. They started in the 1800s, well over a mile out from the current edge of the glacier.

Now, as we may know, glaciers have been advancing and receding as long as they have existed. Much of the landscapes that we ourselves are familiar with in New England have been shaped by the glaciers that used to be here, and obviously those were gone long before humans started pumping large amounts of carbon into our atmosphere. So glaciers naturally have an ebb and flow independent of human-caused climate change. What's different now is not the fact that any particular glacier is receding – it's rather about a break in the patterns that glaciers had been following. Glaciers which, given their past behavior, should be advancing, are receding, and glaciers that would be receding anyway are receding faster than we would expect.

So back to our drive. As we got closer to the glacier, the dates on the signposts got more recent, meaning that the glacier had been shrinking for the past 200 years. Somewhere near the



mid-1800s, our driver pointed out the window. "You see those markers? The glacier was

receding already before the industrial revolution had a chance to make an impact. Anyone who tells you about global warming is spouting nonsense.” I have to admit, I was taken aback by his comment. It wasn’t just that I am used to being surrounded by people who trust in the consensus of the scientific establishment that humans are causing irreparable damage to our climate. This wasn’t the first person I’ve met who didn’t fully believe in human-caused climate change. It was also that throughout our whole Alaska trip, any time we met with any sort of naturalist or park ranger, they always took the opportunity to talk about the dangers of climate change, and how vulnerable this particular landscape is to those changes. Somehow it shocked me to hear someone from Alaska, whose life is so intimately connected with that landscape, particularly someone who benefits from the tourism industry, being so unfamiliar with the science about the fate of the very natural features that draw so many people to visit there.

On the other hand, I was intrigued by this man’s reasoning. He wasn’t coming from a place of total ignorance. Rather than simply trust what he was told, he evaluated the evidence as he knew it, and the evidence did not match up to the scientific claims he was hearing. Despite the fact that I knew he was missing important context, and obviously was failing to take into account the bigger picture, I found his attempt to ascertain the truth for himself somewhat admirable. Granted, he was dangerously wrong, and if too many people continue to think the way he does, we are all doomed. But it’s hard to sort through all the information we are given and know what to believe, and this man was trying to do just that.

In the Haftarah we are about to read, Jonah, too, tries to ascertain the truth for himself. Jonah's name, in fact, is יונה בן אמיטי, Jonah the son of truth. His love of truth leads him to pursue justice to the exclusion of mercy, to the exclusion even of God's will. God tells him to go to Nineveh, to warn the people that their sins will bring certain destruction upon them, and Jonah doesn't want to go. Why doesn't he? Well, it becomes clear that his concern is NOT that they won't believe him. Jonah knows that they will believe him, and change, and yet, he still doesn't want to go.

What Jonah tells God after the people repent, and after God spares their lives, is that the people are undeserving. "O God! Isn't this just what I said when I was still in my own country? That is why I fled beforehand to Tarshish. For I know that You are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, renouncing punishment." Jonah recites a list of what is usually understood as positive attributes of God, but in context, he treats them as insults. He thinks God let the people off too easily! The people of Nineveh committed crimes, and no matter how much they tear their clothes and fast and even stop their behavior, Jonah believes that they deserve to suffer the consequences. There's another possible reason, however, for Jonah's harsh attitude towards the Ninevites. Jonah, being a prophet, may have known the truth about what the future held for the people of Nineveh. They were the ones that would conquer and expel the Israelites, causing them immense suffering. How could Jonah contribute to that terrible future by allowing them to escape God's wrath in the present? God tells him one thing, but Jonah trusts only himself to determine the truth of who deserves saving.

The truth can seem elusive. There is technology already in existence that can create fake recordings and images of people saying and doing things that they never said. I'm not just talking about someone doctoring a map with a sharpie – this is digital technology to create images and sounds that sound real. It is already possible to create fake videos, and some day those videos will be so convincing, we won't be able to believe our own eyes when we watch a video, for fear [that footage was faked](#). Even without fake videos, the myriad of supposed "facts" that we are exposed to every day is mind-boggling. We all know now about the social media campaigns designed to trick people on both sides of the political aisle into believing things that aren't true. I know that I don't have the time or energy to research every single bit of information that I learn, and I certainly end up relying on people and organizations that I trust to help me shape my view of what is true. How could I not? No one person could possibly fact-check the amount of information that we all interact with every day.

One of the many names that the Jewish tradition has for God is Truth. In the 13 attributes, which we have recited throughout this season, we call upon God as the God of truth, and even outside this penitential season, in the blessing after the *Shema* in the morning we call God truthful five times. We may look to God as the epitome of truth, and since we understand ourselves to be created in God's image, we are meant to emulate that. If God's essence is truth, then emulating God means that we need to tell the truth, and we are responsible to identify the truth when we hear it. So how can we go about this tremendous task?

Here are three pieces of guidance that I think we can draw from the Book of Jonah:

Figure out who to trust: Jonah is a prophet, sent to the people because God assumes they might need some help in facing up to the truth of the impact of their behavior. He is effective because people trust him and his message. We make our own determinations about what to believe – but we can't do it in isolation. Of course, that brings us to the problem of knowing who is a trustworthy messenger in the first place. The book of Deuteronomy tells us to judge prophets based on whether their predictions come true. Is that really the way to tell if someone is trustworthy? If so, that presents a real challenge. We usually can't wait to find out if a prediction was true to know whose advice to follow. We need to know now! Furthermore, we often look to others to learn about the past and present as much as the future, and many experts shy away from making clear predictions because of the myriad of factors that can impact the future. The greater question is often who we can rely on to report and analyze the past and the present.

A second piece of advice: Be both wary of and open to all voices, including new ones. You never know where the truth may come from. It's mind-boggling to me to think that the Assyrians living in Nineveh were open to the truth when it was spoken by a foreign prophet who didn't even worship the same gods that they did, and yet they did listen to him, and they were saved from destruction because of it. When we are open to new perspectives, we're more likely to be able to recognize when we may have been mistaken.

And lastly, just because you know a fact doesn't mean you know the full truth. My cab driver knew the truth about the when the glacier we were visiting had started retreating, but he was

missing the full context that would have explained to him how the glacier's rapid retreat was part of a larger, more alarming pattern. Jonah, like my cab driver, had blinders on in his search for truth. Jonah assumed that because he knew the people's past, and because he knew their future, he knew what should happen to them in the present. But of course that is a judgement call. God explains in the Book of Jonah that



God cares about all of God's creations, and wants to protect them, take care of them, encourage them to do right and reward them when they do. God thinks that repentance is always welcome, even when short-lived, and so despite the "facts" of the situation, God's response was fundamentally different from Jonah's.

We live in a bewildering world of facts, opinions, and predictions, all jumbled together so that they can be hard to piece apart. In a few hours, we're going to go back to that world, and we'll need to go back to making sense of it all. We do have a responsibility to treat information and ideas with discernment, but we don't have to do it alone. Taking to heart the lessons from Jonah, we can figure out who we trust, be both wary of and open to new voices, and remember not to conflate individual facts with the whole truth. And when we err, as we are bound to, we can remember another lesson from Jonah: God is merciful. The truth is that we can correct our mistakes when we find them, and be forgiven for them. And then we go out into the world, and try again.