

This is the first in a short series of homilies on the lessons we can learn from climate change.

Thirty years ago, in the early days of environmental law, it seemed that most environmental problems were local. Pollution came from cities and bedeviled the residents of those same cities. Wilderness areas suffered from human incursions, and rare species were endangered by habitat change or over exploitation.

What we thought we knew then is true — but only partly. As it turns out, pollution can travel long distances. SO_x from the Midwest causes acid rain; NO_x can travel hundreds of miles to cause smog. Indeed, as it turns out, pollution from China can be detected on the U.S. West Coast. And species are endangered not just by local activities but by invasive species and spreading pathogens.

Nothing embodies the “smallness” of our world than climate change. According to the IPCC, thousands of Europeans died in a recent heat wave because of climate change, which was caused by emissions not only there but halfway around the world. Deforestation in Brazil and Indonesia threatens the lifestyles of Eskimos and endangers polar bears. It is indeed a small world after all.