

Once Again, the Flood

August 19, 2007

The Reverends John Parker Manwell
and Phyllis Lenoir Hubbell
Cedar Lane Unitarian Universalist Church
Bethesda, Maryland

Reading (Phyllis)

So much of life in our modern world is about wanting more, for ourselves, at great cost to others, and to our planet. George Ella Lyon, in her poem “Inventing Sin,” imagines, somewhat playfully, what God might say to us about all this:(1)

God says to us
 we cannot read
She shouts
 We take cover
She shrugs
 and trains leave the tracks

Our schedules! we moan
Our loved ones

God is fed up
All the oceans she gave us
All the fields
All the acres of steep seedful forests
And we did what
 Invented the Great Chain of Being
 and the chain saw
Invented sin

God sees us now
 gouging ourselves &
 starving our neighbors
 starving ourselves &
 storing our grain
& She says

I've had it
 you cast your trash
 upon the waters –
 it's rolling in

You stuck your fine fine finger
into the mystery of life
 to find death
 & you did
You learned how to end the world
in nothing flat

Now you come crying to your mommy
Send us a miracle
Prove that you exist

Look at your hand, I say
Listen to your scared heart
Do you have to haul the tide in
sweeten the berries on the vine

I set you down
a miracle among miracles
You want more
It's your turn
You show me

Sermon

John: I have to confess that global warming remained on the distant horizon of my concerns until last summer, when we went to see Al Gore's movie, “Inconvenient Truths.” Then it hit me like a wrecking ball. This is not just an issue to urge somebody else to do something

about, by writing letters to the paper, or to Congress. It's an issue that threatens every single one of us—and, most tragically, our children and our grandchildren. Our own five grandchildren, the two youngest not yet two years old. The children of this congregation, and of our congregation in Baltimore. The kids in our schools. All of us.

Though we usually call it “global warming,” the part that so dramatically got my attention was flooding: the flooding that will come as the glaciers and polar icecaps melt, and sea levels inexorably rise. It might take forty years, not forty days, but the suffering will be of biblical proportions.

Whatever the elevation of the neighborhoods where we live, can we really expect to remain self-sufficient on a devastated Earth, once flooding and conflict have displaced huge parts of its population?

Phyllis: Much of the energy industry, and the politicians who advocate for it, would have us believe that global warming is not really a problem. Anyway, they insist, scientists disagree, and we need more research. Or—at the other extreme—they say it's already too late to stop global warming, so we should concentrate instead on protecting us from its effects—do they mean by building New Orleans-style levees around the Gulf Coast, the Chesapeake Bay, and all our other low-lying coastal areas? Others, of course, say all this would cost too much. There's nothing we can do, they say, so presumably we should eat, drink and be merry while we can. I wonder if they have grandchildren?

Al Gore and others have pointed out that although there's uncertainty about the details, and the rate of change, there are simply no scientific studies, among the hundreds reported, that have questioned the truth of the proposition that human behavior is causing global warming. Here's the scientifically accepted truth about global warming, in a nutshell. Sunlight radiates an enormous amount of heat onto our Earth every day, and much of it is bounced right back. If none bounced back, we'd all burn up. If it all bounced back, we'd all freeze. The amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere regulates how much of the heat that bounces back from the Earth, stays in the air to keep us warm, but not too warm.

Especially since the middle of the 20th century, our burning of carbon fuels—that is, coal, oil and gas—has been pouring an ever increasing amount of carbon dioxide into our atmosphere. It stays there for a very long time, and traps an increasing part of the heat that's reflected back from the Earth. So the Earth and the oceans get warmer.

For most of humanity's existence, the amount of fuel we've burned has not been enough to make much difference. But with the coming of central heating and air conditioning, of automobiles and oil-powered transportation, it's now making a big difference. Based on the carbon dioxide already added to the atmosphere, and the increase that will come if we keep on our present track, it's a difference that's projected to have a catastrophic impact on human life, not to mention causing the extinction of vast numbers of biological species.

Once change begins, the effect is complex and often beyond what we might foresee. Still worse, it can be compounded. For example, as the atmosphere and the oceans warm, glaciers and the polar icecaps melt. Because ice reflects the sun's rays far more than do the earth or the water, once the ice turns to water, more of the sun's heat is absorbed and the earth and the oceans heat up even more. There can be tipping points, after which it can be far harder for changes in the way we live to slow down the warming of our globe.

Quite apart from this warming, the melting of the ice in glaciers, and in the Antarctic, because it's fresh water ice melting into the sea, adds volume to them, and sea levels rise. All around the world, glaciers are melting more rapidly. At present rates of melting, some time in this century, there won't be any more glaciers in America's Glacier National Park.

In the Antarctic, the collapse of the Larsen-B ice cap last year came, ominously, much sooner than scientists expected. Greenland, too, is mostly fresh-water ice, and it's also melting rapidly. The melting of Greenland's ice would raise sea levels around the world by an estimated twenty feet, and it's happening now. The melting of the Antarctic ice shelf would raise sea levels by another twenty feet. Either one would flood the house John and I live in on the Back River in Essex, just east of Baltimore. It would flood vast areas along our eastern and southern

coasts, from Ocean City to Miami, from New Orleans to Houston—not to mention parts of Washington, D.C.—and poverty-stricken and hugely vulnerable areas in whole nations like Bangladesh. Where would their millions of people go? Where would we go?

Flooding is the most dramatic consequence, but long before the ocean rises even twenty feet, you and I, and certainly our children and grandchildren, will find our lives disrupted in other ways, as food supplies are disrupted, and ecological disasters bring vast if unforeseeable changes. The impact on Africa and Asia would be far worse. Even after much watering down (no pun) at the insistence of western governments, the report of the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change last Spring predicted both flooding and climate changes that will raise havoc with global food production, water supplies, disease and species extinction. A supplemental report this summer reminded us that even though they live far from coastal waters, as much as 40% of the world's people may still be hurt, because their water supplies come from melting ice and snow .

John: When the Kyoto treaty fell from favor in our country a decade ago, it was in part because of resentment that developed countries would be required to do more than undeveloped ones. There was also the spectre of China, which would remain free to go ahead with a huge planned expansion of its coal-fired electricity grid. Unfair, came the cry from Americans, even as people in the developing countries said “You made the mess. You clean it up.”

But a bigger reason for our nation's rejection of Kyoto was a campaign of disinformation by our oil, coal and auto industries, and their political allies. They raised a cloud of phony doubt about the science. Now, at last, popular concern about global warming has begun to ignite, thanks to Al Gore's movie—and to defections in the ranks of industry (think BP, formerly British Petroleum, now staking out its place in the world as “Beyond Petroleum”; and think Toyota, which has staked its future on smaller cars and hybrids like the Prius.) And thanks also, I think, to hurricanes Katrina and Rita, which hit us back-to-back in 2005, and their successors which threaten us again this year.

Global warming now has the public's attention. Even the Supreme Court has weighed in, with a ruling that the EPA can no longer claim that it lacks authority to regulate carbon emissions. California has already entered into a “treaty” on global warming with Britain. Nine northeastern states have agreed to freeze carbon emissions from their power plants, and begin to reduce them. Many cities have established carbon emission goals. But though public opinion is changing rapidly, my hope is tempered by the unconscionable resistance of our federal government to doing anything about the problem, even acknowledging it. Eleven states, for example, perhaps soon to be followed by Maryland, have joined in a California initiative to enact stricter limits on carbon emissions from automobiles. But they cannot take effect without permission from the federal Environmental Protection Agency— which, under pressure from the auto industry, has so far refused either to let the states go ahead, or to take any action of its own.

Still, there's hope in people like you and me making changes in the way we live. Remember, we don't have to do it all by ourselves. The changes we and others make will, in time, bring our economy, and others, to a “tipping” point that will bring along.

What can we do? First, because the biggest offender is coal, and to a lesser extent natural gas, and because so much of our electricity comes from these two sources, we need to use less electricity. This is the demand side, and there's a legion of things we can do, from turning lights off to buying energy efficient lighting and appliances to adjusting to cooler homes in winter and warmer ones in summer. Think sweaters, and fans and fluorescent bulbs.

On the supply side, beyond installing solar panels to generate our own energy, we can sign up for the green option in buying our electricity—suppliers who derive at least a part of their electricity from sources like solar arrays and windmills. As we do this, the cost of these sources will drop, and others will follow our lead.

Turning now to carbon emissions in transportation, the most obvious step we can take, a big and easy one, is to drive hybrid cars. The average hybrid emits less than half the carbon dioxide emitted by the average SUV. An equally potent step is to drive less. We can combine

the trips we make. And, dare we suggest it? We could begin to think about living closer to our work, and using public transit.

Some things, of course, take legislation. Here's where those letters to Annapolis and Washington come in. The biggest single thing we as a country could do to reduce our carbon dioxide emissions would be to enact a tax on carbon-emitting energy. Yes, it would raise prices. That's the point, to force us to use less fuel. If it hurt poor folks especially, they should get a subsidy.

Some people prefer trading in "carbon equivalents." As consumers, we can pay a little extra to help plant trees, etc., to offset the carbon emissions of flying (flying is a big offender). Industries can sell carbon emission savings when they invest in energy-saving equipment, in excess of what's required by law— investment they otherwise might not make. When we buy these credits, we're providing an incentive for others to invest. There are also credits for planting trees. The more trees, the more carbon dioxide is soaked up. And a huge and still unproven idea for reducing carbon is to sequester it, underground or in the ocean.

Many of these steps to reduce our carbon emissions were urged in a supplemental report of the UN panel in May. If we take them seriously, we can slow and even stop what is now a runaway train of global warming.

Phyllis: Finally, there's another sort of tipping point, one that intrigues us as former lawyers. Author Tim Flannery, an Australian academic and writer, speaks of it in a book entitled *The Weather Makers*. As we know, an established excuse from liability by insurance companies, and sometimes in other lawsuits, is that a loss was caused by an "act of God," beyond our human control. But as we become increasingly aware that we're the ones who are causing global warming, we'll no longer have that excuse.

Imagine, not far down the road, oil and electric companies being held liable, in the gigabillions of dollars, for their contribution to climate change—as asbestos manufacturers and tobacco companies already have been held liable for persisting in distributing products which we've long

known cause cancer and death. We can hold the sympathy, too, because they really do have choices. Any number of new companies, and a number of established ones, like Toyota and BP, are discovering that despite the fear that reducing carbon emissions will cost them money, there's also a lot of money to be made in supplying a growing popular demand for alternatives.

* * * * *

Along Interstate 70, near Frostburg, there's a rusting steel structure beside the road, the skeleton for a dreamed-of future ark. Perhaps you've seen it. A local minister had a vision, he said, of God's will for his congregation that they prepare for another great flood, on the scale of Noah's. You and I may be skeptical about a flood that great, but even we can imagine the scale of human disruption which a rise in sea levels of forty to fifty feet in this century would cause, all around our planet. Not everybody's going to have access to an ark, so to speak. Even if we ourselves feel safe, do we really want to go it alone, pulling up the gangplank against our neighbors along the coasts? Or are we going to recognize that we're all in this together, all around the world?

Halting global flooding is a challenge. A huge one. But no greater than others we've met in the past. And it's a satisfying challenge, to think of bringing all the peoples of the world together in a common effort, and leaving our world a safer place for our children and grandchildren.

"I set you down," She said, a miracle among miracles.
You want more
It's your turn
You show me.

Can we do it? I think we can. Can we do it soon enough? It's up to you and me.

(1.) In Marilyn Sewell, *Cries of the Spirit* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991), pp. 245-46.

