News
EarthBeat



by Donna Schaper

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September 8, 2017

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Homes in Houston are seen partially submerged in floodwaters Aug. 30 after Tropical Storm Harvey. (CNS photo/Adrees Latif, Reuters)

Recent news of devastating flooding in India, Nepal and Bangladesh, the latter where one-third of the country is under water, joins continuing reports on Hurricane Harvey's wide swath of destruction and what's to come with Hurricane Irma. All these intense storms come near the 12th anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, and at the end of October, the fifth anniversary of Superstorm Sandy.

With each new weather-related disaster, we reel. We moan. We write checks, thinking they should be for more.

The one thing we don't do is imagine how to stop the extreme flooding. Flooding, we can handle; it is biblical in its legacy. Extreme, human-caused flooding is another matter altogether.

Here with great sadness I dust off the word "mandatory."

Before the Harvey disaster and the South Asia flooding, news came to me from Western Massachusetts that bus services would be eliminated or cut back on 22 routes, affecting approximately 1,200 people due to "budget troubles." I found myself oddly deranged. I couldn't figure out my over-reaction to this trouble; I know these things happen all the time.

I used to live in Western Massachusetts and loved using the free buses reserved for the college towns there. They gave me a kind of joy, and were appropriate to the size of the community. They had happy drivers. You talked to people on those buses.

Why, said I to anyone who would listen, why don't they tax gas at the pumps instead of limiting bus service? Why would a good state like Massachusetts not put a big fat tax on gas-guzzling cars every time someone bought one? Those monies — from gas taxes on the fuel and vehicles that run off it — could be used to expand, instead of limit, bus service.

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The answer may come deep from within the heart of the Lone Star State, which loves its individualism while proving that it knows how to help its neighbors in times of disaster. We don't like to be told what to do. We don't like taxes. We don't like government. We don't like mandatory anything.

And yet if we don't do something about gas and oil and refining it, the carbon dioxide emitted by fossil fuels will only exacerbate climate change and make conditions ripe for more intense storms like Katrina and Sandy and Harvey more prevalent. We are in too deep to get out without forcing ourselves to do something differently.

Katrina, Sandy, Harvey and their pals have increasingly severe impacts.

Why?

While scientists are leery of saying climate change caused any particular storm, there is agreement that warmer ocean temperatures and rising seas create conditions for hurricanes to become more intense and more frequent. Along with it, flooding becomes more widespread.

A leading driver of climate change is carbon emissions, such as those spewed from the burning of fossil fuels by more and more cars on the road due to limited bus service.

In Harvey's case, it is too late to "hope" some of us will change enough that a police officer's life will be saved or a woman's new work wardrobe not be destroyed or a child's school closed indefinitely. The Anthropocene epoch is here, according to some scientists, and it is flooding our basements all the way up to our attics.

Obviously, it would be better if we could self-regulate, but the likelihood of that happening to our individualism and its lone stars, way beyond Texas, is unlikely.

We need mandatory taxes on gas guzzling cars. We need increased gas taxes at every pump in the nation. During World War II, we allowed mandated regulations, and we collectively self-regulated on behalf of a larger cause. We could do that again in regard to climate change and the disasters it is causing.

We could rebuild the Houston's of the world differently. We could use this horrible human and natural crisis to mandate — as in mandatory — a wholesale refocus on

sustainability and the use of renewables. If oil production is down 30 percent, let’s keep it that way. Let’s not rebuild for a non-future. We could also mandate zoning in Houston, and not allow people to rebuild in floodplains, as a condition of receiving tens of billions in disaster aid.

My friend wants me to tell him about a silver lining in this terrible, dark, predictable cloud. Here’s what I can find:

The gospel is the permission and the commandment to enter difficulty with hope, according to Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall, a Canadian theologian, who said it so well that I have to borrow often his hopeful frame. We could wade into this awful disaster — to birds and humans and land — with hope for a more plausible and secure future.

We could mandate change. We could change direction. That is a lot better than sending checks that will go to rebuild refineries and vulnerable homes in flood plains. We could tax ourselves as people whose basements may still be dry but who see the clouds gathering in our neighborhoods, as well.

That seeing and self-regulation, even outside regulation, is the only silver lining I see.

You probably think this is not your fault. Or that you can do little about it. Changing that view of yourself is perhaps the most important thing you could do.

You could wade into difficulty with democratic and self-regulating hope.

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