News
EarthBeat



Men in a community on the Marañón River in Peru's Amazon region unload a pot of water they have drawn from the middle of the lake, the community's main water source. (Photo by Barbara Fraser)



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Editor's Note: *EarthBeat Weekly is your weekly newsletter about faith and climate change. Below is the Sept. 4 edition. To receive EarthBeat Weekly in your inbox, sign up here.*

I had no running water in my apartment last week. Not a drop. That's what can happen when you live in a building in Lima, Peru, that has 50-year-old plumbing, especially when the pipes have sprung leaks during the coronavirus pandemic and the building's blueprints have somehow disappeared. The result was a major overhaul of the water and sewer pipes, which meant turning off water to the apartments while the plumbers located and replaced the pipes.

Fortunately, the spigot in the basement still worked, so buckets saved the day. But it was a small reminder, during this Season of Creation, of how hard many people around the world — especially women and children — have to work just to have water for drinking, cooking, washing and bathing.

Heating a kettle for a bucket bath took me back to my earliest years here, when if you were lucky, water came through the city system to your neighborhood for a few hours every day. If you were really lucky, your house had a storage tank on the roof that would give you running water most of the day. Otherwise, you filled buckets and barrels during those hours and rationed your water use.

A drought in 1992 complicated things even more. Most of Peru's electricity at the time came from a hydroelectric dam on the Mantaro River, high in the Andes Mountains. A drought meant less water in both the Mantaro River and the Rímac River, the extremely polluted source of drinking water for this megacity. So not only did we have days without water service, with no warning of cutoffs, but we also had rolling blackouts. Companies bought generators; the rest of us used candles.

That year rearranged my priorities: I discovered that food, shelter and running water are crucial for a healthy life. Electricity is really nice. And everything else is optional.

I remembered that lesson when the plumbers turned off the water in my apartment building and began replacing the pipes. Hauling buckets from the basement was a nuisance, but at least I had water.

Billions of people around the world are not so lucky. Lima is a city of 30 million in the middle of a desert — the second-largest desert city in the world, after Cairo, Egypt. In the mid-1990s, I would sometimes accompany a priest friend on Sunday mornings when he went to celebrate Mass at a children's home on the north side of the city, a good hour's drive away. The route took us past an "invasion" — a vast, sandy plain where migrants to the city, or children of migrants looking for a place of their own, had built shelters made of straw mats (no rain here — for better or worse) to stake a claim.

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Bottles serve as a makeshift irrigation system for plants in a new settlement of houses on a barren hillside in Lima, Peru. (Photo by Barbara Fraser)

In cities and rural areas worldwide, the lives of many women and children revolve around fetching water. About 2.2 billion people — more than one-quarter of the world's population — do not have safe water piped to their homes, according to the World Health Organization, and 3 billion lack basic facilities for washing their hands. And that's in the middle of a health crisis in which handwashing is a key preventive measure.

If those figures conjure images of rural Africa or Amazonia, that's certainly accurate — but the problem exists in the United States, too, often out of the mainstream eye until something like the Flint, Michigan, water crisis, which exposed thousands of children to toxic lead, hits the headlines. Flint is far from the only case. "More than 30 million Americans lived in areas where water systems violated safety rules at the beginning of last year, according to data from the Environmental Protection Agency," Justin Worland wrote in Time in February 2020.

As with most environmental hazards, the lack of safe water affects people of color the most. Environmental racism is a fundamental environmental injustice. People who live in polluted neighborhoods are more vulnerable to disease, including COVID-19. Governments' failure to provide clean water is a violation of international agreements that water is a human right. And it is a manifestation of ecological sin — "pollution and destruction of the harmony of the environment" with impacts that will ripple through future generations.

During this Season of Creation, let's give some thought to water — to our use and abuse of it, and to the fact that corporations have convinced us that their bottled water is safer (even though more than half of all bottled water comes from the tap), leading to mountains of plastic waste that often ends up in the oceans or exported to low-income countries. What steps can we and our faith communities take, beginning this month, to help provide safe water to those who need it?

"*The disintegration of biodiversity, spiraling climate disasters and unjust impact of the current pandemic on the poor and vulnerable: all these are a wake-up call in the face of our rampant greed and consumption.*"

— Pope Francis

Here's what's new on EarthBeat this week:

- Caring for creation is about environmental justice — about making sure everyone has access to safe water, sufficient food of good quality, clean air, and a safe and healthy neighborhood free of pollution. In EarthBeat's Lens on Creation reflection series, which began Aug. 31 and continues until Oct. 4, photographer Paul Jeffrey focuses these issues and more through a lens of faith. To receive a new reflection in your inbox every Monday, Wednesday and Friday, sign up here. You can also view the entire series on the EarthBeat website in English and Spanish.
- As a preview to the month's stories, reflections and events, EarthBeat's Brian Roewe dove into the significance of the month by answering the Burning Question: What is the Season of Creation? If you're curious about how this ecumenical celebration came to be, or if your parish or faith community is looking for prayer resources and suggestions for action, Brian has answers.
- Continuing the justice theme, in his column, "Faith Seeking Understanding," Franciscan theologian Daniel P. Horan reminds us that unsafe water and polluted air disproportionately affect people of color, and that the Season of Creation calls us to dismantle environmental racism in our country and around the world.
- Pope Francis drew the connection between caring for our common home and working for justice in his Sept. 1 message for World Day of Prayer for the Care for Creation, writes Junno Arocho Esteves for Catholic News Service. Two days earlier, after praying the Angelus prayer with pilgrims in St. Peter's Square, the pope also encouraged efforts to protect the environment, singling out those working to clean up a devastating oil spill off the coast of Mauritius.
- Although the pope is a global leader on climate issues now, he says he was a latecomer to the topic. He told French environmental activists that when he was archbishop of Buenos Aires, he did not understand the environmental concerns of Amazonian bishops.
- After suffering a stroke just before turning 49, writer Ian Vorster struggled to walk, to put ideas into words, and to control anxiety and anger. Realizing he needed a goal, he challenged himself to solo hike California's strenuous John Muir Trail for his 50th birthday — a journey to healing that he says responded to a call from the Holy Spirit.
- Oklahoma Gov. Kevin Stitt has asked the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to give his state jurisdiction over environmental regulations on Native American reservations — including oil and gas operations. This could circumvent a July court ruling that gave tribes sovereignty over much of the eastern part of the

state, Ti-Hua Chang reports for The Young Turks.
- Parishes in Louisiana organized to help hundreds of thousands of people left homeless or without utility services by Hurricane Laura, while assessing damage to churches from winds clocked at up to 150 mph. Scientists predict more frequent intense storms in a warming climate.

And from Pope Francis, an environmental video message:

"We are squeezing out the planet's goods. Squeezing them out, as if the earth were an orange" and creating an "ecological debt," Pope Francis says in a bilingual video message (in his native Spanish, with English subtitles) for the Season of Creation. "Who is going to pay this debt? … Today — not tomorrow, today — we have to care for Creation responsibly."

Here's some of what's new in other climate news this week:

- As if Hurricane Laura's destruction — and the prospect of being without water and electricity for weeks — weren't sufficient, Louisiana residents braced for a dangerous heat wave that was expected to be especially hazardous for the elderly and outdoor cleanup crews, writes Emily Atkin at Heated. She muses that heat waves — another form of extreme weather linked to climate change — should also be named, like hurricanes and typhoons.
- Meanwhile, at Yale Climate Connections, Jeff Masters explains how climate change causes hurricanes to intensify more quickly, making them more unpredictable and dangerous.
- Solar energy is a key part of the transition away from fossil fuels, but as solar panels reach the end of their life span — about 25 years — they will turn into millions of tons of toxic electronic waste. Recycling technology is lagging behind the problem, reports Maddie Stone for Grist.
- With the future looking bleak for fossil fuels, oil companies are betting on plastics, and African countries could suffer the consequences, write Hiroko Tabuchi, Michael Corkery and Carlos Mureithi in The New York Times. Industry representatives are asking the U.S. government to pressure Kenya to relax its plastic bag ban and keep importing plastic waste.
- Power plants contributed most to increased CO2 emissions between 2010 and 2018. What was in second place? SUVs, which quadrupled their carbon emissions during those years, reports Niko Kommenda in The Guardian. "If SUV

drivers were a nation, they would rank seventh in the world for carbon emissions." Replacing SUVs with sedans is one of the recommendations Catholic Relief Services received from two Georgia Tech University students who are helping the aid organization reduce its vehicle carbon emissions by between 6 million and 9 million pounds.

Coming events:

- Join religious leaders as they discuss climate impacts affecting South Carolina's coastal communities and outline ways to take action at the virtual South Carolina Religious Roundtable on Coastal Communities & Climate Change, from 1:30 to 2:30 p.m. Eastern time Sept. 9.
- As the first anniversary of the Synod of Bishops for the Amazon approaches, and to mark the Season of Creation, the Latin American Confederation of Religious offers a Spanish-language virtual seminar on religious life in that region. "Amazonía: Nuevos caminos para la vida religiosa y una ecología integral" ("Amazonia: New paths for religious life and an integral ecology") will be held from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. (Central, or Colombia time) Sept. 9 to 11.
- Economic, environmental and socio-cultural sustainability are the focus of the 8th International Conference on Sustainable Development to be held — virtually — in Rome on Sept. 9 and 10.
- Catholic Climate Covenant is offering a five-part series of webinars to help participants renew their faith in the God of all creation and join in prayer and action for the care of our common home. The first webinar of the series,“ Catholic Social Teaching, Politics, and the Fullness of Faith," will be held from 3 p.m. to 4 p.m. Sept. 10.
- Does Africa have alternative energy pathways for its growth or must the continent follow the path of dirty energy? This Season of Creation webinar from 4 p.m. to 5:30 p.m. East Africa Time Sept. 10, will examine ways of refueling Africa through ethical investment.
- The Global Catholic Climate Movement is sponsoring a four-hour Laudato Si' retreat from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Eastern time Sept. 12 to help participants embark on a journey of "ecological conversion to transform the way we relate to our Creator, all of Creation and our most vulnerable brothers and sisters."

Closing beat:

"Monks have geological patience," a Benedictine friend in a monastery on the shore of Lake Titicaca in Peru told me years ago. You can get an idea of how long that is by taking a look at this animated, interactive ancient Earth globe, which shows how the planet's surface and its climate have changed over 750 million years as continents have merged and drifted apart. The place where you live now was somewhere else entirely when the first coral reefs were forming in the oceans. Want to imagine your backyard as Jurassic Park? Take this deep Earth history globe for a spin.

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