



Did you know there are two Pasadenas in this country? I first discovered this by googling, which I often do, looking for services I don't yet have at my fingertips.

Pasadena, Texas.

As it turns out, the city was named for none other than our Pasadena, founded in 1893 by John H. Burnett of Galveston, who gave the city the California namesake because of its lush green landscape.

Pasadena, Texas might have remained largely a mystery to me were it not put on the map in the recent weeks. Yes, along with the surrounding suburban towns, Pasadena, Texas has been underwater. I watched one video documenting the flooding in this town. So different from those we just saw, of people helping one another in unthinkable situations, the video feed simply showed gas stations immersed up to the pumps, the spindly refinery towers in the background. No people appeared in these images, only cars, and the artifacts of the oil and gas.

As it turns out, Pasadena is no longer the lush green of its original namesake, but a hub of the massive greater Houston petrochemical network, a nexus for oil and gas production in our country. One of the main features of our sister city is that it originates the 5,519 mile, 30 inch Colonial Pipeline, a privately held company, which directs hundreds of pipes full of refined gasoline, home heating oil, diesel and jet fuel all the way from Texas to New Jersey, a twenty day trip from start to finish. On its journey, the Colonial pipeline picks up fuel in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama, then moves on through Virginia, Delaware and finally New Jersey. The recipients of this fuel are namely our airports and our Department of Defense. The environmental impact of Pasadena's energy economy has earned it the unfortunate nickname of, no joke, "Stinkadena." For many years, the town has tried to curb its reputation, trying its hand at renewable energy by hosting the Sun Edison plant, a key producer of a chemical found in solar panels. Citing trade decisions made by China, SunEdison unfortunately shuttered in 2016.

Journalist Alan Weisman is the author of the 2007 New York Times bestselling book *The World Without Us*. The starting place of the book assumes the worst, in a benign sort of way. As in the title, Weisman asks us to imagine what the world would be like if human beings simply vanished, not by tragedy or extinction, but simply as an experiment in understanding what the planet would be like if nature were to reclaim the world we now understand as "ours."

He looks first at the original landscape of places around the globe, then analyzes how manmade changes have impacted the environment, and how, if these changes suddenly stopped, how nature would respond. He asks what will be washed away and what will remain? What landscapes can nature possibly reclaim, and what is beyond restoration?

One of the key places he looks at is Houston. "Houston", he writes, "All 620 square miles of it, straddles the edge between a bluestem and grama-grass prairies, that once grew belly-high to a horse and the lower piney-woods wetland that was (and still is) part of the original delta of the Brazos River. The dirt-red Brazos begins

far across the state, draining New Mexico mountains 1,000 miles away, then cuts through Texas hill country and eventually dumps one of the biggest silt loads on the continent into the Gulf of Mexico. During glacial times, when winds blowing off the ice sheet slammed into warm gulf air and caused torrential rains, the Brazos laid down so much sediment that it would dam itself and as a result slip back and forth across a deltaic fan hundreds of miles wide. Lately, it passes just south of town. Houston sits along one of the river's former channels, atop 40,000 feet of sedimentary clay deposits.

Weisman goes on to describe Houston's history of tragedy and industry, coupled together to make it the hub of oil and gas we know today. The Brazos River, no stranger to flooding, first overflowed its banks in early September 1900 in what is known as the deadliest hurricane in history with winds up to 145 miles per hour. To the South, the Island City of Galveston was devastated as the bay and the Gulf of Mexico became one. The loss of life was enormous, estimates of the dead as high as 12,000. According to historians, this flood prompted the shift in focus from Galveston to Houston as the port of industry we know today.

Our American history is full of stories like Houston, where people have chosen to bargain with nature's power as we advance progress and industry. For most of us, disaster often looms only in the back of our minds, even if we know the landscape we inhabit, provides us with resources or helps us make our living also makes us vulnerable.

Despite Weisman's experiment, the world is very much with us, and we with it. We have altered the world to meet our needs and market demands, often without regard for the environmental impact, or an understanding of how nature will behave as a result.

This morning, as we gather, I know our minds and hearts are on Florida as Hurricane Irma is falling. We've been shocked by images of its wreckage on small Caribbean Islands and fear for what it will leave in its wake today. As we gathered last week, the Verdugo Hills were ablaze in the LaTuna fire, shutting down the 210 and sending many of our neighbors to seek shelter from the choking smoke and threatening flames. Many of us have lamented the fires blazing in Oregon, destroying the beautiful Columbia Gorge just outside of Portland. An 8.1 magnitude earthquake rocked the coast of Mexico Friday, with a death toll still climbing.

When natural disasters do happen, we scramble to move ourselves to higher ground, protecting our homes, our families, our belongings, and of course, our pets. We place our faith in our amazing first responders, who risk their lives to save us. After we have taken care of ourselves, we do our best to help our neighbors. Sometimes, we help others first, knowing that some need more help than we do.

And, after the waters have receded, after the fires are out, after the ground stops shaking and the damage is done, we begin our recovery, and resume living in a landscape forever changed by nature's forceful hand. With multiple natural disasters waging at once, can we let this moment wake us up to the impact our lives make on the world? If we let it, it can also wake us up to the reality of global warming, created in part by that petrochemical industry that lies at the epicenter of the Houston storm. In moments like these we can see clearly how deeply we are entrenched in the moral, scientific and human problem of global warming. It becomes shockingly real when it impacts our lives and livelihood. We are so utterly dependent on this world we live in, and yet we have to be clear headed about the choices we make in facing our future predicaments. We are all in this together, and we know this will keep happening. We know we need to get serious about planning for future tragedies.

Some people of faith have said that the news reads like the end times, the manifestation of biblical prophecies. Even the New York Times, our most reasoned news source by many accounts, published an article on Friday

titled "Apocalyptic Thoughts Amid Nature's Chaos? You Could Be Forgiven." You don't have to look far in the Bible to find a verse to substantiate these thoughts. In the first book of the Hebrew Bible, Genesis, you can find both the beautiful description of God's "in the beginning" creation of the world is contrasted quickly by the story of Noah and the flood, God regretting what God gave to humankind, and unleashing a flood to wipe out sin and wickedness.

As science-minded Unitarian Universalists, many of us do not find comfort in the spiritualizing of natural disasters. We might instead point to the human impact of climate change or the failure of infrastructure or government response. And yet, the harsh reality of climate science often leaves us feeling more alarmed than comforted. We still search for meaning in the piling up of tragedies. If we do believe in God, we might wonder what on earth God would have to say about these times of ours. The poet George Ella Lyon, author of the story Matt told, writes a somewhat more cynical poem in this vein, imagining what these natural disasters might look like from God's perspective.

*"God signs 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
Gorging ourselves & starving our neighbors
Starving ourselves and 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....

*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.*

Friends, isn't it our turn? In these trying times, we have to listen to our scared hearts, but not let them turn us away from the reality of our planet in peril, but to turn toward one another. Here at Neighborhood Church, we have made a resolution to become a Net Zero Carbon Emissions church, reducing our carbon footprint. Our charge is clear, and our work is ahead of us. We must show our planet that we can and will live in harmony with nature, that we are here not only dominate, desecrate, and deplete its resources. To close, I

leave you with the words of our water communion blessing, and invite you to join me in repeating them once again.

And when the waters storm, may we turn to one another in this beloved community, called by our mission to create and grow an inclusive religious community connected by love, spirit, and service.

May we be held and nourished in community through every condition, journeying together from shore to shore, held as one people by the great element of love.