THE CENTER OF THE UNIVERSE

"Cry, and YHWH will answer; call, and God will say 'I am here' – provided you remove from your midst all oppression, finger pointing, and malicious talk! ... You will rebuild the ancient ruins, and build upon age-old foundations. You will be called Repairer of Broken Walls, and Restorer of Ruined Neighborhoods"

(*Isaiah* 58:9, 12 – *The Inclusive Bible*).

by the Rev. Dan Scheid

When I lived in Grand Rapids, a folk artist named Reb hung a primitive paint and particle-board sign in his neighborhood that said "East Hills – the Center of the Universe." It seems the center has shifted a hundred miles east of Michigan's second city to Flint, my home for the past year and a half.

Flint, once known as the birthplace and hospice bed of General Motors, is now known by the hashtag, #FlintWaterCrisis.

The story of the Flint Water Crisis is well-known: the cash-strapped rust belt city came under state-appointed emergency management and, to save money, switched its water source from Lake Huron by way of Detroit to the Flint River. To save more money, the corrosive river water flowed through the taps less than fully treated, which caused a rash of problems and an outbreak of outrage by citizens that elected and appointed officials willfully ignored, until one problem was proved: the pipes and plumbing leached lead into the city's water and from there into the children's blood, brains, and bones.

The Flint Water Crisis captured the attention of celebrities of all kinds who made pilgrimage to the city: athletes and artists, movie stars and musicians, politicians and pundits, and even the President of the United States.

It inspired an outpouring of human decency and generosity and good will by ordinary folk who sent money and donated trunkfuls and truckloads of bottled water and lugged case after case to churches and community centers, to apartment complexes and private homes.

It led to an immediate and continuing financial commitment by Episcopal Relief and Development and to a visit by a bus-load of bishops, led by Presiding Bishop Michael Curry.

It even caused contrition by some in government, and criminal indictments of others.

I live in Flint. My wife and I drank the water, unfiltered, for several months while we were assured – and believed – that what flowed from our faucets was fine.

Our water is filtered now, and laboratory tests show lead levels at or near zero parts per billion. I tell people that for us, personally, the Flint Water Crisis was – is – more of an inconvenience. We have the resources to adapt. We are both in good enough health, neither very young nor very old, and with uncompromising immune systems, so we should be okay.

For many others, however, especially people who are poor and parents of young children – who lead poisoning affects the most – the Flint Water Crisis was and is a source of constant worry. For all of us, it is a breach of trust in civic institutions, a grave injustice, and literally a mortal sin. And this is what concerns me as a parish priest and motivates me as a public theologian, because this is where the death-dealing mortal sins of Environmental and Systemic Racism are met by the loving, liberating, and life-giving promise of Biblical Justice as proclaimed by Jesus.

What is Environmental Racism? I recently attended a public hearing in Flint of the Michigan Civil Rights Commission, and the takeaway from all the experts interviewed was that Environmental Racism is what happens when black people, other people of color, and poor people live either in neighborhoods that have active pollutants, like incinerators or heavy industry, or in communities where these kind of polluters once stood.

People affected by Environmental Racism tend not to have the political power to prevent such polluters from operating nearby, and, in the

Pictured: The famous brick streets of Downtown Flint, just outside of St. Paul's Episcopal Church.
Next page: Water donations flood in to Episcopal water response sites from around the state and beyond.

case of abandoned industrial sites, the depressed values of adjacent properties mean that the low rents there are all poor people can afford.

Environmental Racism need not be intentional; it is the result that counts. No one intentionally poisoned the Flint water supply. It was the result of decades of common manufacturing practices by the auto industry that contaminated Flint's soil and water. It was the result of misplaced austerity measures, criminal mismanagement, and the willful ignoring of people in the city who cried out for help and who had no redress to their local elected officials.

Environmental Racism, then, is a component of the larger reality of Systemic Racism, in which laws, rules, and customs are enacted over time to favor one group over others. Even a quick survey of United States history shows us beyond dispute that these laws, rules, and customs favored white people (and if you want to learn more about this, be sure to attend one of the anti-racism workshops that our diocesan team offers).

These two mortal sins of Systemic and Environmental Racism poison us all, because their effects aren't limited to impoverished black people only. Sixty percent of Flint's residents are black; forty percent are white (including my wife and me). Forty percent of Flint's residents live below the poverty line; sixty percent don't (including my wife and me).

And yet because Flint is majority black and poor – while our institutions privilege white and

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wealthy – all of us are caught in a system that sees Flint and cities like it as disposable.

Many commentators have observed that a water crisis such as ours wouldn't have happened in a wealthy, white community. And all the experts I've read and listened to agree: Flint's water crisis is a clear case of Environmental Racism.

So much for Environmental Racism… where does Biblical Justice come in?

The passage from the Prophet Isaiah that begins this story has become central in how I understand my ministry in my city. Much of Flint is broken and ruined; it is in need of reparation and restoration. This is true of Flint's infrastructure; it is also true of Flint's people. It was true of Isaiah's people, too.

The people of relative privilege Isaiah was speaking to in the fifty-eighth chapter wondered where God was and why God wasn't listening to them: "Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?"

If you want me to notice, God says, if you want a just society – one without the death-dealing mortal sins of Environmental and Systemic Racism – then practice justice: reform your institutions to liberate the oppressed, reform your economy to eliminate hunger and homelessness and nakedness, and reform your hearts to admit and celebrate that we all share in a common humanity.

Or to put it another way: God calls us to repent of our sins, repair the damage we've done, rebuild the trust we've broken, and restore the health and wholeness of the community.

The Biblical Justice found in Isaiah was central to how Jesus understood his ministry, too. Some have called another passage of Isaiah, read by Jesus in Luke's Gospel, Jesus's mission statement. I suppose this makes it the mission statement of Jesus's movement, of which we are the Episcopal branch, as the same Presiding Bishop Curry who visited Flint reminds us.

Jesus, visiting his hometown synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom, found this passage in the scroll of Isaiah that was handed him: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Members of the Jesus Movement of the Diocese of Eastern Michigan: If you want to repair and rebuild and restore Flint's lead-poisoned people and lead-leaching pipes, if you want to uncover and expose Environmental Racism in your own communities, and discover and dismantle Systemic Racism that's there too, then may the words of Isaiah and of Jesus proclaim to you the first of many years of the Lord's favor.

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To join response efforts in Flint, visit www.eastmich.org/Flint-Water-Relief.