

THE FAITHFUL CONSUMER

By Sarah Streed

At times I've felt like a Cassandra, wailing and prophesying impending environmental doom. Cassandra was the Trojan princess who warned the Trojans not to accept the gift of that giant wooden horse. She's mentioned in Virgil's Aeneid:

*... Yet, mad with zeal, and blinded with our fate,
We haul along the horse in solemn state;
Then place the dire portent within the tow'r.
Cassandra cried and curs'd th' unhappy hour;
Foretold our fate; but, by the god's decree,
All heard, and none believ'd the prophecy. (Aeneid. 2.323, Dryden translation)*

Oh, there are others who are concerned about the environment—other Cassandras—but there does seem to be a pervasive view that environmentalists are those on the fringe, radical tree huggers who live outside of normal, everyday life.

Cassandra was proved right, which is why she's got her name in history. During the night the soldiers swarmed out of the horse and the final downfall of Troy began. Are the environmental Cassandras going to be proved right? Is their concern warranted? In a sentence: If we don't change—Yes.

The scientific evidence is in and climate change (a less catastrophic way of saying global warming) is happening. In 2001, 16 major academies of science from around the world got together and issued a statement, which said, among other things:

“It is now evident that human activities are already contributing adversely to global climate change. Business as usual is no longer a viable option. ... We urge everyone—individuals, businesses and governments—to take prompt action to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases. The balance of scientific evidence demands effective steps now to avert damaging changes to the earth's climate.”

Possibly the Trojans laughing and walking around in the streets will say, “OK, so global warming is real. But so what?—Does that really affect me and my family?”

In a word: Yes.

The foremost effect is upon human health. You, me, our children, are already suffering from global warming. Our own state officials are telling us so. As I write this column, in early February, it is the **fifth day of an air quality health advisory, now extending over the entire state of Wisconsin**. This advisory falls under the “orange” category, which means the air is dangerous to breathe for sensitive individuals. Sensitive individuals

include: children, the elderly, those with asthma, bronchitis, heart disease, and so on. Do you have children? It is dangerous for them to breathe this week.

What caused this air quality health advisory? Soot. High concentrations of soot—or particulates—are microscopic pieces of pollution that attach to the lungs and make it difficult to breathe. This time of year, in winter, particulate pollution is mainly from vehicle exhaust and smoke from chimneys and coal-fired smokestacks. The electricity that seems so clean when we turn up the thermostat or turn on a light has a cost. Chances are this electricity comes from a dirty, particulate-spewing coal-fired power plant and during the winter, the pollution sticks around and to our lungs.

Yet, in Oak Creek, near Racine, Wisconsin, WE Energies wants to build new coal plants. Two Harvard University researchers and an environmental scientist recently did a study on the proposed Oak Creek expansion and found that the pollution from the new coal plants—if they were built—would contribute **every year** to 1,800 asthma attacks, 430 emergency room visits, 25 hospital admissions for cardiovascular and respiratory concerns, and 24,000 minor restricted activity days, and 26 premature deaths. The researchers stated that these were actually conservative estimates because they did not study children and adults younger than 30. (If you're interested in learning more about the Oak Creek expansion, contact Eric at 608-257-4997.)

My faith tells me I have to be a Cassandra and cry out to people of the consequences if we continue to live in this way. It can't be God's will that we're changing our climate and God's creation for the sake of our own selfish needs and desires. It can't be God's will that our children have days in childhood when it's dangerous to play outside, dangerous to breathe! When Jesus was preaching, he took a child, stood her in front of the disciples and said that we all need to become like children. Then he said that whoever caused a child of faith to stumble, it would be better if they drowned in the sea. I can't help but think that we're causing our children to stumble by the environmental legacy we're leaving them.

We're all "fringe" now. Anyone who lives in Wisconsin needs to be on the fringe. Anyone who wants a healthy lifestyle needs to be on the fringe. Anyone who desires to live a life of faith needs to be fringe. Anyone who wants to protect children needs to be fringe. We all need to become environmentalists.

Monthly tip: Look at the big picture. Taking care of the environment is not "fringe" but part of daily life. For example, keeping the heat in your home at 70 degrees 24/7 is not only expensive and wasteful, but is destructive to your health, if you have an electric furnace, which, chances are, you do.

Until next month, then, God bless our world—and live "fringe."

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