

Pastor's Column April 2016 by Pastor Marty Toepke-Floyd

Tree Hugging on Earth Day

"The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein." Psalm 24:1

Friday, April 22nd, marks Earth Day. I was a kid the first time it was observed in 1970. President Nixon was in the White House – the same one who signed into law the Clean Air and Clean Water Acts and created the Environmental Protection Agency. The Industrial Revolution was a bit over 200 years old, and the Digital Age was just dawning. The global human population was 3.7 billion, only half of how many men, women and children are alive today.

I was going on camping trips in Pennsylvania – "Penn's Woods." I hiked through forests and fields, built stream erosion projects, enjoyed the great outdoors. I learned how to recognize oaks, maples and other trees by their leaves and other characteristics. I looked for "mitten trees," sassafras, and dug up the roots to chew on – the raw essence of root beer.

I have loved trees all my life. In the Great Smoky Mountains I have walked under towering tulip trees. In California, I have seen the even grander redwoods, and in the Sierra Nevada mountains, I've enjoyed the sweet odor like vanilla or butterscotch of the Jeffrey pine. That's what you smell when you stick your nose into the crevices of its bark. Yes, I am a genuine "tree-hugger!"

I recently learned that an average tree can soak up a ton (2,000 pounds) of carbon dioxide (CO₂) in its lifetime. Trees in the Amazon rain forest not only remove CO₂ from the atmosphere, but also produce half the oxygen generated on land. Trees are part of God's creation for maintaining life on, Earth, the only planet that sustains life and which we call "home."

The problem is that we humans, by our sheer numbers and powerful technologies, produce CO₂ far faster than plants and trees can absorb it. Just driving between my preaching points each week, my car generates as much CO₂ in just one year as a tree stores over decades. We are tipping nature out of the balance which sustains life for all God's creatures including ourselves.

I should be planting trees every day to offset all the CO₂ I produce by driving (burning gasoline), as well as the natural gas used to heat the house I live in, not to mention the coal burned to generate the electricity I depend on each day.

I am just one person of the 7.4 billion living on earth, though as a North American, I use much more energy than most other people on the planet. This means my normal lifestyle produces lots of carbon dioxide – a greenhouse gas linked to climate change.

Carbon dioxide only makes up about 0.04% of the atmosphere (by contrast, oxygen is 20%), but a little goes a long way in its effect of trapping heat from the sun. Aided by CO₂ and few other trace gases, the greenhouse effect makes our planet habitable for life – part of God's "very good" creation.

But our human activity, especially our reliance on burning carbon based fuels – oil, gas and coal – for energy, has increased the levels of CO₂ from a mild 280 parts per million (ppm) in 1750 to now over 400 ppm and rising steadily each year. If we do nothing different, CO₂ levels are on track to reach 600 ppm by the end of the century. That will lead to a devastating runaway greenhouse scenario.

Already, human activities ranging from hunting, fishing and poaching to habitat loss (due to deforestation and pollution), are causing mass extinction of plants and animals and undoing God's

good work. Climate change caused by human actions only adds to the stress on plants and animals. These negative human impacts on nature are NOT God's intentions for life on earth. Remember, it's not our planet – it belongs to God.

We humans are physical creatures, too, who depend on sufficient food, clean water, pure air and other renewable resources. Our future is threatened by our current greedy and short-sighted actions.

In order to preserve the natural environment for living creatures including our own kind, we need to pivot to renewable energy sources such as wind and solar. We also need to conserve energy and reduce our demand. We must live more simply, so that other creatures may simply live.

God gives us the choice to repent NOW, or condemn future generations to a living on a planet that is degraded with a worsening climate. I know which future I prefer, but I can't achieve it alone. God help us all to make the right choices now to ensure a good life for those who will come after us.