

In today's reading from Jeremiah, God says, *I have heard what the prophets said prophesying in My name with lies, saying, "I have dreamed a dream."* Although dreams sometimes figure in the Bible as an instrument of authentic revelation, the classical prophets do not have recourse to them.

Dramatic acts, rather than dreams, were the stock and trade of Jeremiah. He walked 350 miles in a linen loincloth, bought a potter's earthenware flask and smashed it before the elders and priests, made a yoke and wore it like an ox in the presence of King Zedekiah, and purchased a building lot in Jerusalem just before the city fell.

*What does straw have to do with grain?* asks God. What do lying prophets have to do with prophets who speak the truth? Discerning the true prophet from the lying prophet was made more challenging because the word of the true prophet required changes the people resisted.

Maintaining a just order in Israel was also challenging because it too required changes the people resisted. In Psalm 82 we read:

*How long will you judge dishonestly,  
and show favor to the wicked?  
Do justice to the poor and the orphan.  
Vindicate the lowly and the wretched.  
Free the poor and the needy,  
from the hand of the wicked save them.*

In the biblical world view, the order of creation itself is founded on justice. When injustice prevails, *All the earth's foundations totter*. The perversion of justice is the first step toward the apocalypse.

Jesus also challenges those resistant to change: *I came to fling fire upon the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled. Do you think I came to give peace on earth?* (Well, in fairness, that is what the angels announced at your birth.) *No, I tell you, but rather division.*

*You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?* The "appearance of earth and sky" is expressed by a single word, πρόσωπον = "face." Jesus contrasts nature and history, praising his hearers for knowing how to read the face of creation, but faulting them for not knowing how to read the present moment.

The fire Jesus flings upon the earth creates a crisis. The crowd must decide “in the strife of truth with falsehood, for the good or evil side.” The crowd cannot not decide. Any attempt to evade or escape from the reality of the crisis will only make things worse.

This April, in the tradition of Jeremiah, Peter Kalmus, a NASA data scientist, chained himself to the entrance doors of the JP Morgan Chase building in Los Angeles. “I’m here because scientists are not being listened to . . . we are going to lose everything.”

If your house is on fire, you panic. The adrenaline kicks in and you act. The planet is on fire. If things continue on the current trajectory, Kalmus prophesied, in twenty years we will wish we had the summer of 2022.

Neil deGrasse Tyson, an astrophysicist, explains the earth’s sensitivity to changes in average temperature. Eight degrees cooler and the ice age returns, with glaciers reaching into St Louis. Two degrees warmer and sea levels rise enough to move coastlines significantly inland. If the polar ice caps melt, the water level reaches the left elbow of the Stature of Liberty.

Are the scientists accurately reading nature’s expressions, or are they lying prophets?

What of this present moment in history? Richard Haass, who worked in the George W. Bush administration and is now President of the Council on Foreign Relations, an independent, non partisan organization, believes the next two to three years will determine whether we remain a constitutional republic.

A group of historians painted the present moment as among the most perilous in modern history for democratic governance, comparing it to 1860 and the 1930s. They privately warned the President that America’s democracy is teetering. The warning is set in the larger context of the contest between democratic values and institutions and the trends toward autocracy globally.

Maybe the scientists and historians are neither true prophets or liars. Maybe they are just mistaken. Maybe there really isn’t a crisis, and we can keep calm and carry on. Maybe . . .

Jesus calls the crowd “hypocrites,” a word better translated “charlatans.” It means someone without self-knowledge who believes he or she is doing good or knows the truth but remains caught up in evil. In this instance, Jesus is saying, ignorance involves guilt since it could have been avoided.

All the crowd has to do, says Jesus, is open their eyes, be as attentive to the present moment in history as they are to nature. The crowd, we, don’t get to claim, “We didn’t know.”