

God of all power, Ruler of the Universe, you are worthy of glory and praise. At your command all things came to be: the vast expanse of interstellar space, galaxies, suns, the planets in their courses, and this fragile earth, our island home. From the primal elements you brought forth the human race, and blessed us with memory, reason, and skill. You made us the rulers of creation. But we turned against you, and betrayed your trust; and we turned against one another.

I wish I'd written that, but I can't claim the words of Eucharistic Prayer C from our treasured Book of Common Prayer. You can be forgiven if you didn't recognize it. Much as I love its poetry and call-and-response nature, the order of things is so theologically weird that we don't use it all that often. Now, as residents of "this fragile earth, our island home," our story gives us dominion over creation, and we haven't exactly done a great job. I don't want to get into climate change doomerisms, but I don't want to ignore the evidence, either. And to be clear, there's a lot of evidence. We've known about the effects of human activity on the global climate since at least '96 -- sorry, that's 1896 -- maybe earlier, but thanks to some very deep pockets and a desire for industrial progress at any cost, much of that knowledge's been ignored, suppressed, and mocked. Who done it is a topic for another day, but suffice it to say, humanity's known and exercised our dominion recklessly.

Do y'all know about "hunger stones?" Big surprise that stones've caught my eye, I know. There're more than 30 hunger stones in Europe, mostly in the Rhine and Elbe Rivers. Typically, they're covered by the rivers' waters, but as droughts worsen and water levels fall, these stones emerge. The dates of terrible droughts are carved into their faces, and some of 'em bear carved warnings. Two stick out, so to speak. One reads, "We cried -- We cry -- And you will cry." Another: "If you see me, weep." The Rhine's at its lowest level ever now, at a mere 24 centimeters. In Freedom Units, that's about 3.5 Big Macs deep. 24 of the years since 2000 were hotter than any other on record. This July was the hottest month the Lower 48've ever experienced, topping even the hottest months of the Dust Bowl. Droughts are so bad that wildfires are running rampant around the world, rampant enough that, in France, the fires detonated forgotten World War II-era artillery shells long hidden in the woods, a commentary on humanity's failings twice over.

A quick sidebar: the cyclical argument against global warming ignores a pretty important thing here. The warnings mean suffering has arrived, and the desire to brush off such warnings since "we've been here before" reflects a disregard for the sanctity of human life. We've got record high temperatures, enormous wildfires, increasingly dangerous storms, and a particularly strong El Niño. As those with dominion over Creation, we're not bringing God a terribly good report card. But also, we're supposed to prioritize care for the poor, and climate change affects the poor more intensely than anyone else: costs of food and electricity, the inability to move somewhere safer, scarcity leading to conflict which leads to wars the poor are sent to fight, to name a very few.

For what it's worth, while those hunger stones are the European harbingers of trouble, similar harbingers show up in other parts of the world. In Taiwan's Sun Moon Lake, there's a statue of 9 frogs stacked on top of each other; the more frogs become visible, the greater the severity of the drought. They're all visible now, including the base they were built on. In Egypt, they've got nilometers, stone structures showing both drought and flood lines for the Nile River. Crops thrive in the middle, and rulers who understood the dangers of water too far in either direction were wise enough to store up excess for the inevitable lean years. And when those lean years inevitably came, they were ready. Scarcity came and was endured, but they would survive.

Joseph understood those dangers. He wasn't a ruler, but he gained influence, enough to convince the pharaoh to set aside some of every harvest for the drought that was on its way. Seven years of planning to endure the inevitable seven lean years to come. It was his warning, his understanding of the signs, his insights from God, that allowed Egypt and his family to thrive while the rest of the region suffered. By the way, those water-level nilometers had been around for a thousand years before Joseph arrived in Pharaoh's halls. I'm not trying to discount miraculous dreams or Joseph's wisdom or anything like that, but maybe part of his gift was a willingness to look around and understand what he saw.

Actually, I wonder about Biblical Prophecy as a whole. For much of our history, prophecy's been thought of as a kind of sacred soothsaying, telling the as-of-yet unseen future. But the Bible rarely talks about prophecy that way. Usually, prophets aren't future tellers. They're truth tellers. (For what it's worth, the "sooth" in "soothsaying" means "truth," "reality," or "justice.") Usually, prophets were advisors. False prophets, like those belonging to Pharaoh and later kings, don't tell their leader what's really happening. True prophets have the guts to tell the truth, even when that could cost their position, their livelihood, or their lives. Think of the emperor and his new clothes and how many complimented his new look; it took a true prophet to speak the obvious truth. I wonder how much of prophecy comes down to the courage to speak the truth using the signs we can all see. Hunger stones, for example, are messages from the past warning us of coming dangers, but they aren't magical. They're just the lived experience of real people who wanted us to avoid the suffering they endured. It's not magic that historians or scientists or sociologists can read the signs we all see and warn us what they mean, but it is prophecy in the sense that they tell us the truth we don't always want to hear.

Pretty much all those Old Testament prophets' warnings were as simple as "ya know, if you let powerful people run loose, bad things are gonna happen." The immense number of verses lambasting the unchecked wealthy, the honorless powerful, the cruel exploiters of Creation and humanity alike are so many hunger stones waiting for the right conditions to reveal their truths. Prophecy, yes, but not in the mystical fortune telling sense. Prophecy as truth-telling, reality-telling, justice-telling. Listen to the wisdom of the people who came before. If there is something miraculous to these kinds of prophecies, it's that, in spite of our modern intellectual hubris, sometimes we actually do listen. And when we do listen, we've got a much better chance of survival.

There're so many prophets vying for our attention, some false, some true. And, if we keep our attention stuck only in this moment, we can get all tied up trying to figure out which is which. But if we pull back, zoom out, let ourselves see the signs so many before us laid for our benefit, we will see the obvious truths. May we have the wisdom to understand and heed their warnings for the sake of "this fragile earth, our island home."