

Signs in the fiery California sky

Climate science is apocalyptic: it reveals fundamental truths.

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Carr Fire, northern California, 2018

This was the worst year on record for California forest fires, with two of the largest raging out of control for weeks in mid-November. Those fires killed at least 88 people, forced the evacuation of tens of thousands, cost billions of dollars in firefighting expenses, and spread smoke so toxic that residents in cities a hundred miles away were encouraged to don masks or stay inside.

As apocalyptic as these events were, they represent the “new normal” in California. The ferocity and extent of the fires have been increasing for decades, and with the

climate getting hotter and drier, the trend is almost certain to continue. The advent of a perpetual fire season in California matches the predictions of climate scientists. As global temperatures rise, so too do risks for extreme weather events, including the prolonged periods of heat and drought that make the California vegetation combustible.

On the Friday after Thanksgiving the U.S. government quietly released a report by 300 federal scientists that underscored the climate-related threats to Americans' health, security, and economic life. The report predicts the warming of the planet will bring more massive fires in the Southwest, crop failures in the Midwest, and widespread breakdown of roads, bridges, and pipelines from severe flooding and storms. For the scientists, the rapid pace of climate change is stunning. "We are seeing the things we said would be happening [in the future], happen now in real life," said Katharine Hayhoe of Texas Tech University, one of the authors of the report.

The climate assessment comes on the heels of a dire report issued in October by the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which warned that the world has only a dozen years to cut greenhouse gas emissions to keep global warming to a maximum rise of 1.5 degrees centigrade (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit) over the preindustrial period. Further rise would spur even greater disasters. Even meeting the goals of the 2015 Paris treaty on climate change, it said, may not be sufficient to restrain global warming.

Yet the Trump administration has made clear it will disregard the climate assessment made by its own government as well as the warning by the UN panel. The administration pulled out of the Paris treaty last year, and it remains committed to overturning environmental rules designed to reduce greenhouse gas pollution from vehicles and power plants.

In Advent the church ponders apocalyptic texts that refer to "signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars" and "distress among nations" and a judgment that will be like a "refiner's fire." Climate science is apocalyptic in the biblical meaning of the term, for it reveals fundamental truths. It reveals the delicate, intricate balance of the natural world and humanity's place in it while exposing humans as fatally prone to pursue our short-term interests over the well-being of others, even our own children.

Climate science is apocalyptic in yet another biblical sense: it contains a seed of hope. It reveals the truth, as bleak as it is, so that people might still change their ways.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Fiery signs in the sky."