

Am I wheat or straw?

By [Elizabeth Palmer](#)

August 11, 2016

To receive these posts by e-mail each Monday, [sign up](#).

For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page, which includes Palmer's current Living by the Word column as well as past magazine and online-only content. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.

"What has straw in common with wheat?" God asks in Jeremiah. A lot, on the surface. They grow together, attached until harvest, sharing nutrients and sunlight and water. They're both eminently useful--wheat as an edible grain; straw for animal feed, mulch, fuel, bedding, and packaging. Years ago I was enlisted to help build a straw bale house. I still remember how hot the sun was outside of the house--and how surprisingly cool it was inside. After a few hours of hard work we retired to the cool interior, sat on bales, and ate freshly baked bread. Both straw and wheat have their merits.

But the prophet's point is to highlight difference, not sameness. And straw doesn't measure up to wheat, particularly in a context of food scarcity. Straw is dry and tough. It's empty relative to wheat, just as the dreams of the false prophets fail to stand up to the truthfulness of God's word. It's inferior to wheat, just as our colorful visions of justice fade in comparison to the brilliance of God's desires for the world.

Part of me wants to argue against the prophet. I want to find a place for straw as well as wheat in the created order of things. I want to ask Jesus why he really thought it necessary to burn the chaff after separating it from the wheat.

This is because I worry that I am, more often than not, straw rather than wheat--a flimsy, vacuous shadow of a Christian rather than a hearty child of God who radiates nutritive energy for a hungry world. Rooted in survival more often than generosity, I prop myself up and hope that I might be filled by something outside of myself.

I want to believe that God might choose to work through imperfect beings like me rather than consuming us in divine flames of justice. That is, I want to believe this until it comes to the people with whom I most disagree about politics, religion, and social responsibility. Then I'm right there with the prophet (and Jesus) in wanting to call down divine judgment upon their empty claims and false promises. And I'm far too willing to make quick judgments about my opponents, identifying them as "those who prophesy lies, and who prophesy the deceit of their own heart."

This is why it's actually good news that God is the consuming fire. Better God than us. If we had our way, we'd burn each other up while preserving the empty stalks of our own lives under the pretense that we're wheat. Despite Jeremiah's harsh words, the kind of judgment he calls for is nevertheless something in which we can place our trust. It roots out falsehood and preserves the goodness that God created us to enjoy. In doing so, it makes us all a little better--rather than destroying some and preserving others.

The truth is that every one of us is as much straw as wheat. If we were to acknowledge our own failures, perhaps we could then move forward together in the work that God has given us to do. Thankfully, even when we fail there's a larger miracle at work: God provides wheat in our world full of straw, so that we might be continually nourished into something better than we currently are.