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Small Apocalypses



Photo by Eric McLean



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The fourth season of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* gives to a new beau of the protagonist a funny bit of repartee: “When I saw you stop the world from, *you know*, ending, I just assumed that was a big week for you. It turns out I suddenly find myself needing to know the plural of apocalypse.” Indeed, at that point the show had gone to the end of the world well perhaps a few too many times. The quip elicits a laugh at the way it strains credulity for the world to be constantly in crisis, eternally teetering on the brink of some existential calamity. Sunnydale is, granted, situated on top of the Hellmouth, a gateway between the Earth and various demonic dimensions; Buffy is the latest of a series of Slayers whose job it is to keep something of a lid on the demon-infested valley; if you’re going to date this girl in this place, that’s going to complicate things. But still—an apocalypse a week?

It’s 2020. I don’t find it quite as funny now. Apocalypse has exactly the plural you would expect, and apocalypses big and small are a fact of life. Many on the internet have started casually employing the *Mad Max* epithet “the Beforetimes” to refer back to our pre-coronavirus lives. But at the same time, smaller apocalypses are taking place everywhere we turn with eyes to see. Our rebuilding efforts will have to acknowledge and learn from our apocalypses, at all scales.

The word “apocalypse” comes from ancient Greek, where it meant “uncovering” or “unveiling.” Thus, the last book of the Bible was called, interchangeably, the Apocalypse



of John or the Revelation to John. But though Revelation speaks of the end of one world and the unfolding of a new one, a Christian reader should not assume the world will experience only one apocalypse. Even within Revelation, we are presented with images of a multistep final judgment, with a millennium passing between the first defeat of the blasphemous beasts and the final conflict that precipitates the new heaven and new earth. Rarely is it helpful to speculate where, if anywhere, our own apocalyptic era fits into this prophecy—though that hasn't prevented Christians from doing so, throughout the past two millennia. Rather, we should take comfort that our apocalypse is neither the first nor, likely, the last that followers of Christ have experienced. In every age, there are moments when the curtain is rent and the cosmic stakes become crystal clear.

My family has had a good pandemic. It's strange to say, but I think it holds true. We have been blessed with good health and relatives willing and able to take the precautions needed to stay safe. And our daughter, born in January into this new world, has been a constant delight. She's learned to roll over and sit and crawl and stand, all in a world contracted from what she would have experienced last year. But she doesn't know that. She just loves her parents, is excited to explore all over the floor, and gets upset about having to occasionally take baths.

It's bracing to watch a new person discovering the world, unaware how much of it has slowed or stopped even since her own birth. Babies don't notice the apocalypse—or rather, perhaps all times are similarly apocalyptic for babies, as day by day more of the world and their own capacities are unveiled. Though small, these revelations can be as beautiful and terrible as much grander apocalypses. When my daughter first learned to roll over, she couldn't stop herself. We would place her on her back and she would immediately, compulsively roll onto her stomach, and then be quite upset with her new position. “The evil which I would not, that I do,” she would cry, or infant vocalizations to that effect. Now, she can roll back-to-front or front-to-back with facility. But she's discovering the amazing world of pulling up on things to stand, and often upsets herself when she forgets how to sit back down.

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It feels irresponsible, sometimes, being happy during a pandemic. I'm horrified by the death and disruption descending in waves on my country and the world. And I get good and angry when I think about the feckless denial and magical thinking our government and other institutions engaged in rather than rising to the challenge of saving lives by squashing the virus. But though the pandemic is the biggest thing in the world right now, it's not the center of emotional gravity in my life. I'm first and foremost grateful every day that my daughter is safe, and happy, and growing. I'm living with the smaller scale of apocalypses.

We may not be able to do much in the face of the larger, ongoing apocalypse. But we can take care of our neighbors. We can take care of them by wearing masks, socially distancing, and otherwise arresting the spread of the disease. We can do a lot of good by withdrawing in these ways, but can also find new ways to reach out. My wife, Leah, had the idea early in lockdown. We masked up, washed our hands thoroughly, and went around our block leaving notes for all our neighbors. The notes gave them our phone and email, and a way to sign up for a block-wide mutual-aid email listserv via Google Groups. For anyone who needed help, even for small things, there was now a way to ask those close to them—neighbors who might otherwise have remained completely anonymous strangers.

This was an apocalypse too: an unveiling of the hidden life of our street. Many of our neighbors are elderly, but so far the help people have asked for has not been life or death. A couple in quarantine needed someone to buy stamps for them. A last-minute cook asked for an avocado. Someone setting up to sew homemade masks asked to borrow a sewing machine (and then to find replacement parts to sub for the non-working bits of the machine . . .). Eventually we needed to ask for medical tape when Leah sprained her finger, and neighbors quickly came to our aid. Simple things, but filled with grace.

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One of our neighbors sent a heartfelt note to the listserv in late April, saying that she and her husband were in a high-risk category, and thanking by name those neighbors who had given them masks or shopped for them. She had reached out for grocery assistance, she said, “when it finally dawned on me that dinner every night of wine and

cheese isn't considered a 'balanced' diet." She shared a hope of visiting neighbors' porches when weather and health precautions permitted.

While this unveiling was going on in our neighborhood, our nation was having many of its dark corners laid bare. The shutdown of the country in response to the virus hit some of the most vulnerable hardest, from neglected elders in nursing homes to families living paycheck to paycheck. By and large, our official national response was not to soberly reflect on how we could take care of the most affected, but to insist on putting the economy back into motion, throwing lives into the economic meatgrinder. The folly and callousness of this approach is becoming clearer and clearer as the toll of the virus rises.

The apocalypse is always already here, just not evenly distributed. Individual catastrophes have been rendered visible by the virus, but that doesn't mean they weren't a problem beforehand. The question, then, is how to see things unveiled, even in the absence of a global unveiling. It shouldn't take the seeming end of all things to shake off complacency.

Several recent social movements have, essentially, consisted of demanding that the broader population notice an ongoing apocalypse being endured by their neighbors. The chorus of #MeToo aimed to wake up (mostly male) skeptics to the abuse and harassment faced by a wide swath of victims, predominantly women. Before it was a call for particular redress, it was a slogan of solidarity, helping hurt people realize they weren't alone and weren't crazy. It also gave those who'd previously dismissed the idea that sexual harassment was a pervasive problem a chance to reconsider. Scrolling through social media, they might think, "Her too? Even her? How could I have been missing this?"

In the same way, the stark slogan Black Lives Matter challenges Americans to consider whether their country has been acting as if black lives do matter. Despite repeated, tragic reminders of the ways police act like an occupying force towards black Americans, many people less affected are reluctant to admit the extent of the problem. It's just a few bad apples in the police force. If the problem were a widespread police culture of racially tinged aggression, that would be quite serious, bordering on dystopian. And we would have noticed if we were living in a dystopia, surely.

There is no longer any need to pretend "things can't be that bad." We've seen things be that bad. We need to get comfortable living apocalyptically. We have no other choice at the moment. But even when, Lord willing, one of the vaccines is declared safe and widely distributed and the virus is defanged, we can't be content for all the veils to go back up.

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Popular culture made it seem like it would be easy to tell when you lived in the postapocalypse. There would be squabbling over scarce resources, strange new slang, probably biker gangs in bondage gear. But in truth, we're always living after some apocalypses, before others, and in the midst of still more. Some of us may be sitting comfortably while others have their lives and livelihoods torn away.

I'm not encouraging a guilty paralysis, where we try to comprehend all the world's endings every day. Merely a willingness to listen and act where we can to comfort and support our neighbors, especially those who might be undergoing a hidden apocalypse next door.

Living apocalyptically might mean something as simple as knocking on a neighbor's door to deliver half a pumpkin—an unexpected gift we have just received as I type this, from someone who'd offered excess pumpkins to our listserv. As is fitting for an apocalypse, half a pumpkin demands a speedy response. It can't wait long on your countertop; it needs to be carved and roasted quickly to get you on the road to tasty pumpkin purée.

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be part of that worshipping host.

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But we can also turn to the biblical apocalypse, and take our world's tribulation as a cue to enter more deeply into prayer and worship. Reading Revelation as primarily a geopolitical prophecy misses how much of it is about saints and angels adoring God. This is an unveiling not of the earthly future but of the eternal present of the Beatific Vision. John sees “a great multitude, which no one could count, from every nation, race, people, and tongue,” praising the Lamb of God. This is not a phantasmal future hope but

= a reality to live up to. Our greatest desire should be that we and our neighbors can be part of that worshiping host.

Thus, living apocalyptically is living with both urgency and hope. There is work to be done. Lives and institutions can collapse if no one is there to offer some wisdom, generosity, and courage. But we are not alone, and our allies are not merely flesh and blood. We can approach real and tremendous challenges with a confidence born of eschatological hope. We know how the great conflict between powers and principalities ends. The only question is what role we choose to play. Q

Our resolution should be not simply to survive our present apocalypse and resume “life as normal.” Let us wake up to ways the world ends every day, responding with compassion when we encounter others going through one slow-motion apocalypse or another. But let us also not turn a blind eye to the grace-filled apocalypses of first steps, surprising kindnesses, and new possibilities. Just because a baby, for example, is a small and ordinary being doesn’t mean she is not also an apocalyptic prophet, tearing with tiny hands at the veil that keeps us looking only at what is and not at what ought to be.

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In G.K. Chesterton’s *What’s Wrong With the World*, the ebullient writer chooses a poor young girl’s hair as a criterion against which civilization must be measured. “Whatever else is evil, the pride of a good mother in the beauty of her daughter is good. It is one of those adamantine tendernesses which are the touchstones of every age and race. If other things are against it, other things must go down. If landlords and laws and sciences are against it, landlords and laws and sciences must go down. With the red hair of one she-urchin in the gutter I will set fire to all modern civilization.” Our rebuilding must be undertaken in a spirit that cherishes rather than quashes such tender revelations. As I see what the powers that be have prioritized, my daughter’s hair looks daily redder and redder. ^