

Apocalypse When?

Rev. Dr. Leisa M. Huyck

Did you know the world just ended? It did. And then it just did again, just now. The world ends in every moment. But more importantly, in every moment, it begins anew. It begins again, and again, and again.

That's what physicists tell us, anyway. That the universe, our world, is not so much a thing as it is a process, a series of events that wink out of existence the moment they occur, to be replaced by new events.

Does that make your brain hurt? It does mine. It's easier for me to understand it this way: the world ends all the time. People we love die. We lose jobs, and marriages. We move. We become ill. Places we love get bulldozed. And these are just the ordinary endings, terrible enough—but in the last couple of years, we've had a massive dose of the extraordinary: earthquakes, an oil spill, tsunami, nuclear disaster, another war, threats to worker's rights and women's rights, a hurricane, a massacre of schoolchildren....for months and months, it's been one disaster after another. I don't know about you, but I'm getting really tired.

Each time some terrible thing happens, we are stricken. We are dazed. But we still *are*. The moment our old world ended, a new world began, a world in which we must find our way for the very first time.

How do we make sense of all these endings? How do we find the hope we need, to make new beginnings? Humans have always done this by telling stories.

One of the most foundational stories of Western culture came to us as a way of making sense of violent endings. The world of the ancient Israelites ended again and again. They were constantly in the middle of battles of empire. First the Babylonian Empire came and conquered them, desecrated their most holy Temple, and sent the people away from everything they knew. Then the Persian Empire overthrew the Babylonians and let the Israelites go home and rebuild the Temple. Eventually the Romans came and conquered everyone, and destroyed the temple altogether. The people of Israel were often refugees, whose men were injured or dead, the women raped, the children hungry. They felt small and

powerless. In order to survive as a people, they needed a story that gave them hope. And so when they heard this story from Zoroastrians of the Persian Empire, the empire that once rescued them, they adopted it as their own. The story goes like something like this:

“Once upon a time, a group of people was being oppressed by an evil empire. The people cried out for help to their god, who sent a hero, a messiah, to lead the oppressed ones in battle against the forces of evil. The battle raged back and forth, with fires, floods, and famines. The forces of good unleashed Plagues, but the schemes of the evil Dragons and Beasts on earth defeated them. Animals, angels, and spirits fought on both sides. Eventually the forces of good won a major battle on a hill, and peace reigned for a thousand years. But then the evil forces rebelled again, and so the god completely destroyed the earth and all its the forces of evil. Then he made a new world, where he established a new kingdom that would remain for all time.”¹

Does this sound familiar? It should, because not only is it a summary of the Book of Revelation in the Christian Bible, it’s also the basic plotline of nearly every science fiction and fantasy series ever written. At least once a year, if not more often, a new movie comes out in which the forces of good and the forces of evil square off against one another. Sometimes we get a trilogy or even a seven-part series.

Biblical scholars call this kind of story an “apocalyptic.” The word “apocalypse” is Greek for “lifting the veil,” as in revealing something that was hidden. Apocalypics always began by declaring that the story was revealed in a dream or vision. And they always followed the same basic plot, just changing names and details and images. Many apocalypics were written throughout Jewish history, each to explain its own specific crisis.

Now, early Christianity, as you may recall, was a Jewish movement. So the apocalyptic story in the Book of Revelation follows the same formula that the earlier ones did.

It wasn’t originally accepted as part of the Christian Bible. The Christians were a tiny minority in the Roman Empire and they didn’t want to upset the

¹ Nantais, David E. and Michael Simone. *Apocalypse When?* *America* 189 (4) 18-20 Ag 18-25 2003.

government by making such a violently critical apocalyptic part of their sacred text. But after Christianity became the state religion, this changed. Now that the empire was on the side of God, God must be on the side of the Empire.

Which brings up one of the reasons this storyline has stayed in our consciousness for these last two thousand years: it works for both sides of any violent conflict. It not only gives oppressed people hope, but it also gives conquerors language to use in conquest. As long as each side imagines itself as being on the side of good, the story meets everyone's needs.

But there are many, many problems with the story. Remember, it is a story people told to explain how their world could end in violence over and over again; it was born from a longing to be saved once and for all. And so, it imagines a lone male savior. It imagines time on earth as linear, having a beginning and an end. It imagines this earth as a bad place, which will be destroyed in the final purging of evil from the universe. And it imagines God as an emperor who does the purging through violence, replacing one empire with another.

These themes are the reasons why the word "apocalypse" in our common understanding has come to mean "the end of the world," and a terrifying end at that.

These problems wouldn't be so bad if people understood the story for what it is: a particular narrative that came from a particular time and place to make sense of particular events. But according to a Time Magazine poll, fifty-nine percent of Americans believe the events in the Book of Revelation will come true. And throughout Christian history, the basic narrative has been used over and over again to justify the violence of empire.² It was used to drive the Crusades. It was used by Europeans to colonize the Americas and slaughter their native peoples. It was used by Hitler to build the Third Reich. It was used by Bush to take the United States to war on Afghanistan and Iraq. We are living this story now.

But perhaps the most troubling thing of all, to me, is that the story is self-fulfilling. When we grow up inside it, we grow up steeped in fear and dread. We know that someday everything will end in a terrifying way. People in every generation of Western history have believed that the end of the world is coming

² Brock, Rita Nakashima and Rebecca Parker. 2008. *Saving Paradise*. Beacon Press, Boston. 552 pp.

any minute: the signs are all there. There is always famine somewhere, there is always war, there is always plague, there is always death. Even those of us working on behalf of life and love are so steeped in the story that we default back to its language. We “fight uphill battles” on behalf of women’s reproductive health and immigrant rights. We warn of the dangers of global warming by talking about fireballs raining from the sky. We say repent, or die! Change your behavior or the whole planet will perish!

And when people who want the world to end, and people who want it to keep going, all start talking in the same terrifying ways about plagues and fires and floods and wars, it is difficult not to be afraid. It is easy to think we might indeed be close to the end of the world. It is easy to lose hope.

But I think hope is our best hope. And so I think we need to start telling a different story.

Is there a different story? There are many. Here is one:

“Somewhere, high in the mountains, there is a cave. Inside the cave lives an old, old woman. She spends most of her time weaving. She wants to weave the most beautiful garment that ever was, and she has spent a very long time at it. She has come to the point where it is time to attach a fringe of porcupine quills to the edge of the garment, and so she needs to flatten the quills with her teeth. From years of biting down on the quills, her teeth have been worn down to nubs, but still she works on, weaving, and flattening.

Now, at the very back of a cave there is a stew, simmering, in a cauldron. The cauldron hangs above a fire that began so long ago that it might be the oldest thing there is. The stew in the cauldron contains all the seeds and grains and herbs that grow on the surface of the earth. If the old woman doesn’t stir it, the fire will scorch everything and who knows what troubles could ensue.

So she gets up to stir the stew. She leaves the weaving on the floor, and slowly, painfully, makes her way to the back of the cave. Now the moment the old woman turns her back on the weaving, a great dog springs up from the entrance to the cave. The dog comes over and sniffs and paws at the weaving. It finds a loose

thread and pulls on it, and pulls and pulls. But all the threads are woven together and so next thing we know, the weaving is all undone.

When the old woman comes back from stirring the stew, she finds, instead of her beautiful creation, a chaotic mess of destruction. She stands there and looks at the heap of loose threads. And then she realizes she is tired. She has been doing this work by herself for thousands of generations, and she is tired and lonely. So she calls on her siblings and her cousins, and they call on all their children and their grandchildren, and soon everyone crowds into the cave. The people look at the threads, at their colors and textures, and then they begin to speak. As each speaks, the others listen. Even the littlest ones speak. And as they speak, and listen, into their minds comes a beautiful design. It is even more beautiful than the last one. Together, they take up the mess, and they begin again, to weave the most beautiful garment that ever was.”³

You know, there have been many times in my life, when I felt bereft of hope for this world. When I felt so weighed down by sadness for all that was being lost that I didn't see how or why we should even bother trying to save anything. But then I would read that there are more than six thousand women's groups in Africa planting trees. Or I would see a dandelion growing from a crack in a parking lot. And I would realize that life loves itself: it wants to live. Human beings might have the power to destroy life as we know it now...but we do not have the power to destroy life forever. There have been massive floods before. There have been times when the sun was blotted out for years by the ash of volcanoes or the debris of meteor crashes. There have been times when the whole planet was on fire. There have been mass extinctions. But life has always survived. It has adapted and evolved and taken new shapes and forms. Endings, no matter how terrible, have always meant beginnings.

Well, call me crazy, but somehow this gives me comfort. And I think, what if we turn our own energies toward helping life along? What if we imagine God, not as a vengeful emperor, but rather as the force of life that calls us toward love and beauty? What if, instead of stories of lone heroes destroying the world, we tell stories of communities coming together to heal it? What if, instead of terrible and

³ This is my adaptation of a story from Michael Meade's *The World Behind The World: Living at the Ends of Time*. Greenfire Press, Seattle, WA, 2008. Pp. 15-17.

frightening stories of the doom that will come upon us if we don't change, we tell stories of the beautiful world that is coming into being right here and right now, because we are co-creating it? What if we lift the veil and find, instead of only destruction, also hope, and healing?

This is not to say that we should not mourn what has been lost. No, honoring what is lost is essential to beginning again. It is instead to say that I think we could do with a shift in focus.

For while this a world in which ancient trees are almost gone, it is also a world in which high school students are restoring watersheds in the forests that remain. While this is a world in which tyrannical regimes control whole countries, it is also a world in which protesters have come together to bring tyrants down. While this is a world in which oil companies have the resources to buy wars and control the media, it is also a world in which communities everywhere are sprouting solar panels, re-imagining their transit systems, planting community gardens, and making peace.

What stories of healing are *you* living? Tell them, for these are the stories that will give us hope. And hope is what we need in order to do our work of stirring the pot and re-weaving the world.

The world just ended. Just now, it did. And just now, it began again. Let us lift the veil and see what is there.

Blessed be.