***Waiting for Godot***

A Sermon Preached at Lawrence Park Community Church, Sept 8, 2019

Mark 8:31 – 9:1

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In today’s scripture, Jesus predicted the end of the world as his audience knew it. He said that he would die and rise and after that soon come again, with angels, to judge the world.

Later in Mark Jesus said that soon the sun would be darkened and the stars would fall from heaven, and then, “before this generation passes away,” he would return on the clouds.

The Apostle Paul wrote, in 1 Corinthians 7, to the virgins in his church who were considering marriage, “in view of the impending crisis, it is well for you to remain as you are.” He meant, don’t get married—Jesus is coming soon.

Of course, Jesus and Paul were wrong. Jesus did not come to judge the living and the dead within that generation’s lifetime.

Still, Christians have never tired of predicting the end of the world. All such predictions, however, from people like the early Christian theologian Montanus, through Sir Isaac Newton, to today’s Jehovah’s Witnesses have been wrong.

But now, the end of all things has also become a secular fascination. Consider Margaret Atwood, all by herself. She’s written *The Handmaid’s Tale*—now an award-winning TV show on Hulu, and *The Testaments,* a Booker-prize short-listed sequel. Atwood has also written the *MadAdam* trilogy about a world destroyed by climate change, genetic engineering, and pharmaceutical malpractice.

Post-apocalyptic, end-of-the-world fiction is big. There’s also Cormac McCarthy’s *On the Road* and the *Hunger Games* trilogy and *Station Eleven* and all of Hugh Howey and Stephen King and movies like *World War Z* and *Resident Evil* with their zombies and the *Mad Max* franchise, *Deep Impact* and *Armageddon*, TVs *Walking Dead* and on and on. And now it is an academic discipline too. So, for example, this week I read Bryan Walsh’s *End Times: A Brief Guide to the End of the World*. He writes:

It could be an asteroid that ends life as we know it. As you probably know, this has happened before. About 66 million years ago, an asteroid of about six miles across slammed into the earth. That explosion was 6500 times more powerful than the atom bomb dropped on Hiroshima. Dinosaurs that had ruled the earth for 180 million years went extinct. Meanwhile, thousands of asteroids continue to orbit the sun. NASA is tracking them, and we think we’re okay for the next few years, but nobody is saying it can’t happen again.

Or, the world as we know it could end with a super volcano blowing its stack. One such volcano, Toba, blew its top about seventy-five thousand years ago. Global temperatures fell by about twenty or thirty degrees for several years after, bringing humans to the brink of extinction. Perhaps as few as three or four thousand survived, in Southern Africa, our ancestors. There are still about twenty active super volcanoes today. On average one erupts every 25,000 or 50,000 years. We’re due.

Third, Bryan Walsh also suggests that we could end the world as we know it by nuclear war. We thought that the end of the cold war reduced this threat. But now Putin and Trump have cancelled the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty and things are looking rather dicier. And there are the other nuclear powers chomping at the bit: India and Pakistan have gone to war six times in the last 70 years. Israel has nukes. North Korea has nukes and threatens to use them every week. Iran wants nukes. This week Turkey threatened to go nuclear too.

Fourth, we could also end the world as we know it via climate change. The five hottest years in recorded history have all been in the past ten years. We are seeing more horrific tropical hurricanes like Dorian. We are going to see massive movements of people from areas in the world too hot to live, too flooded to live, or too arid to live, and, they all love to come here. I could talk for hours about climate change, but won’t.

The end of the world could be a pandemic. It has happened before. Justinian’s plague in fifth century killed half the world’s population. The Black Death killed 200 million people. New diseases caused by animal infections jumping to humans, as in SARS or Ebola, are an annual event now. Eventually, one is going to be really deadly.

Bryan Walsh isn’t finished. He writes further long chapters about the dangers of bioengineered pathogens and terrorism, as in the MadAdam trilogy. He writes about Artificial Intelligence about which no less an expert than Stephen Hawking said, “could spell the end of the human race.” And he writes, only half-seriously now, about antagonistic aliens invading earth. Thankfully, he doesn’t mention vampires or zombies.

So, how does all this gloom and doom make you feel?

I find it fascinating that at the end of the book, Walsh says that he nevertheless has hope we’ll somehow make it, anyway. They thing is, Walsh doesn’t anchor his hope. He doesn’t give readers any good reasons for hope. Walsh just hangs hope out there, unsupported, as unlikely as a baby managing to hold onto a helium balloon on a windy day.

In fact, Bryan Walsh actually gives us a reason for abandoning all hope. It is called scope neglect. Scope neglect describes how humans deal with tragedy—or rather, refuse to. When personal, as in the death of a loved one, tragedy may overwhelm us and even break us. But when larger and more extensive tragedies are distant—as is the case with the Bahamas, this week, for example—we tend to mostly ignore that tragedy, and carry on as if it never happened.

Scope neglect. Paul Slovic, a Psychologist, found that our “sympathy can begin to fade as soon as we’re presented with two needy people, rather than one.” This counterintuitive arithmetic of compassion makes it hard for us to empathize with or prepare for huge natural disasters. Our brains do their best to push such thoughts away. “Instead of our worry increasing as the size of the consequence increases, it degrades. Our attention is scarce, and so is our ability to worry.”

So, Joseph Stalin is reputed to have said, after starving nearly four million Ukrainians to death: “A single death is a tragedy; a million deaths just a statistic.”

And that is how it is when it comes to the end of the world. Scope neglect. We can’t get our heads around oceans rising, nuclear weapons falling or pandemics, even though the risks are very real. The scope of such disasters is just too large for us to think about. So, our brains ignore or actively deny such risks.

Even those we pay to look after the bigger picture, our politicians, seem totally paralyzed. Scope neglect, you see, also means their re-election depends on giving you what you want rather than all of us what the world most needs.

One more thing, stands out for me, in Walsh’s book, something that is ironically hopeful. He discusses the prepper phenomenon. Preppers are people who prepare for the end of the world by provisioning themselves with food and survival gear, guns and more guns, hidden shelters and caches full of fuel and more food and even more guns. Preppers plan to survive the end of the world by hiding from it while living on in their shelters with their families, killing everyone who comes near. Preppers. It’s a big thing in the USA.

But it was Walsh’s analysis of Prepper strategy that got my attention. He writes that, “Sociologists who study post-catastrophe societies report that communities often grow tighter, like scar tissue that forms following a wound, even as they endure what seems unendurable.” What is remarkable about all the past disasters that almost drove humans to extinction is that it was human cooperation that saved them, human kindness for their neighbours, human struggling to carry each other’s loads that got humans through these crises. It was the village that survived, rather than the individual prepper; the community that created the conditions for survival, not hidden caches of food.

Which brings me back to Jesus’ predictions about the coming apocalypse. While he may have got the timing wrong, Jesus also said, in the same breath, “if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” Jesus added, “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”

The point worth remembering here is that as he faced the end of the world as he knew it, Jesus turned his back on scope neglect by picking up a cross on behalf of others to save their lives rather than his own. And he invited us to do the same, to save other lives, rather than our own.

You see, cross carrying, his crucifixion, was a subversive political act by one for the many, in the face of injustice, theological incompetence, and the painful suffering of his compatriots. Cross carrying is the invention of nonviolent resistance of the sort that Martin Luther King or Gandhi engaged in. Jesus’ cross was his refusal to be cowed by scope neglect, and his insistence on doing something, even if it was costly to him personally for the sake of all. Jesus’ cross was his way of saying we can make a stand when the odds seem impossible, and our stand can make a difference, if not now, then in a generation or two or maybe even a thousand years. Jesus’ crucifixion laid the groundwork for a new kind of morality that would eventually replace Rome’s oppression of neighbours with a priority for the welfare of neighbours.

Scope neglect is for people who refuse to think more deeply about the world than the taxes they must pay or the pleasures they do not wish to forgo. But we are not bound by that approach. We can, for the sake of the world, carry each other’s—the world’s—crosses, doing whatever it takes artistically or business-wise, politically or at our service clubs, doing whatever it takes religiously or in our schools or labs or donating or volunteering or in our FB posting, doing whatever it takes to see to not only our comfort but the world’s survival.

Look. I don’t have a blueprint for where your area of skill or opportunity is. Discovering it will take your own act of imagination. Making your contribution might well be costly, too, involving a change of priorities or habits or generosity.

But go for it. For the sake of others, like Jesus did.