

Here's how the media would cover the apocalypse, the end of the world:

USA TODAY:	WE'RE DEAD
The Wall Street Journal:	DOW JONES PLUMMETS AS WORLD ENDS
National Enquirer:	O.J. & NICOLE, TOGETHER AGAIN?
PLAYBOY:	GIRLS OF THE APOCALYPSE
Microsoft Systems Journal:	APPLE LOSES MARKET SHARE
Victoria's Secret Catalogue:	OUR FINAL SALE
Sports Illustrated:	GAME OVER
Wired:	THE LAST NEW THING
Rolling Stone:	THE GRATEFUL DEAD REUNION TOUR
Reader's Digest:	'BYE
Discover Magazine:	HOW WILL THE EXTINCTION OF ALL LIFE AS WE KNOW IT AFFECT THE WAY WE VIEW THE COSMOS?
TV GUIDE:	DEATH AND DAMNATION: NIELSON RATINGS SOAR
America Online:	SYSTEM TEMPORARILY DOWN. TRY CALLING BACK IN 15 MINUTES
Inc. Magazine:	TEN WAYS YOU CAN PROFIT FROM THE APOCALYPSE
Lady's Home Journal	LOSE 10 LBS BY JUDGMENT DAY WITH OUR NEW 'ARMAGEDDON' DIET!

(from an email [JSWAY@ATT.NET](mailto:JSWAY@ATT.NET))

First, a little bit of background. Both our reading from Malachi and  
this particular section

of Luke are from a genre of biblical writing known as Apocalyptic. Apocalypse means  
'uncovering' or 'revealing' the real truth hidden beneath the surface. Apocalyptic literature  
is highly symbolic, and often filled with visions of destruction. Apocalyptic writing tells us that  
the present structures are inadequate to deal with the full gamut of human life, and all human

institutions will ultimately fail. This type of literature emerged in ancient Israel during times of persecution. This style of literature was given voice during the period of exile and its aftermath and was most popular in the first 2 centuries before and after Christ. Apocalyptic writing usually arises in times of crisis, when people are looking for some way to understand what is happening – and to hold on to their hope.

By the time the gospels were written, the followers of Jesus were a minority group struggling to find a foothold in both the political society of Rome, which regarded them as a nuisance, and in the religious society of the Jews, which saw them as a threat. With their situation so tenuous, the authors encouraged their readers to hope for an eternal future with Christ in order to strengthen them to withstand their present struggles and persecution; so the apocalyptic literature promised the return of Jesus and urged the people to be ready. (PREACHING RESOURCES, Nov 2008, p. 3)

OK, so what? My second point. We are ALWAYS living in the end times, in the sense that events larger than our usual experience of life keep on happening – whether it be with bigger hurricanes, political dysfunction and drama, earthquakes or sunamis, war and violence, etc.

And these tend to produce 4 types of nonproductive reactions:

- 1) Some prepare for departure. They simply *check out*. If they don't have an exit strategy, they'll get one. They're outta here. History tells of a number of groups who decided that difficult times were signs the end was near. They got rid of their possessions, quit their jobs and settled down to wait for the Lord's coming, but they were wrong. Today, we're likely to move away from the noise and chaos to a place of quiet and rest. We just want to get away from it all.
- 2) Others *give out*. The sheer volume of bad news is exhausting. Most Americans, after voting in a general election, breathe a huge sigh of relief knowing that for the first time in 2 years, we will have a respite, however brief, from the daily barrage of political campaigning and mudslinging. We get tired of it and feel like we can't deal with it anymore. Moreover, many conclude that we must be living in the Last Days. The implications of this eschatological ennui are enormous. Many no longer believe that we can make a difference. We think that no matter what we say or do, nothing will change. Look at how few of us actually vote. Some are overwhelmed by the sheer numbers and reality, and have come to believe that the social problems we face are inevitable, and will only be ultimately ameliorated by the return of Jesus and the inauguration of the Peaceable Kingdom at some future day. We give up on the transformation of this society, which is the garden God gave us to steward and care for.
- 3) Some people *freak out*. We can be immobilized by fear. In the great Chicago fire of 1871, another wildfire raged in nearby Wisconsin, consuming the city of Peshtigo, several nearby villages and 1 million acres of forest. Nearly 1200 people perished, and there would have been more but for the efforts of a priest, Peter Pernin. As the voracious fire drove people ahead of it, many made for the Peshtigo River. When Father Pernin got there, however, he found most people still on the riverbank. They had looked at the immense conflagration and concluded that Judgment Day had arrived. So they stood there, thinking there was nothing to do but await their fate. Father Pernin, not buying that notion, started shoving people into the water, which broke the spell and mobilized the terrified crowd, who – seeing

the water as the water of salvation, leapt in and were saved. It's always good to remind ourselves that no matter what is happening, it isn't over for the planet until God says it's over.

- 4) Finally, most of us probably *zone out*. We don't check out, give out or freak out. We don't react at all. It's just a part of life to us, and we forge ahead, or as President Bush urged us to do in the weeks after 9-11, we go shopping. Because – truth be told – these kinds of catastrophic possibilities don't really concern us much in these United States. What really chills us to the bone are other things: Cancer. Heart attack. The children and the friends they're keeping. The marriage. The relationships. An addiction. Job security. Retirement. It's things like this – not dirty bombs or terrorist attack or environmental catastrophe – that really concern us. (adapted from HOMILETICS, November 2004)

Third, so how do we respond as people of faith? We hope. We hope for an eternal future. Jeremiah Day wrote "The longer I live, the more faith I have in Providence, and the less faith in my interpretation of Providence." No matter what the situation in the world, God remains in charge. This is the main message of apocalyptic literature. So we should never surrender our hope. NEVER. I was in Lithuania to teach for a couple of weeks during the summer of 1998. This was just 9 years after the Berlin Wall had fallen. Just outside of Vilnius, the capital, I visited a hill which is one of the world's great beacons of hope. Tens of thousands of crosses adorn this sacred ground, originally placed there by the Lithuanian people in defiance of the Soviet regime, and now a destination for pilgrims carrying crosses from around the world. Phil Cousineau said following a visit to the Hill of Crosses; "At the top of the hill I read a startling description from a local writer: 'We twin our sad eyes to the crosses. Suffering is the inevitable part of the earthly existence. It adds the real meaning to our lives. Put up a cross when you suffer.'" From 1917 – 1985, the Soviets bulldozed the hill again and again out of disdain for the 'ignorance and fanaticism' that it represented to them. But the bulldozers and threats of deportation could not prevent 'pilgrims, patriots,' and pietists' from returning at night to start over. As one pilgrim put it, "the site is a very vivid relic of our past that rests on a tiny hill and reminds us of our cruel and glorious history..."

Eventually, the hope of the place won out. In 1985, the Soviet bulldozing campaign ended when Gorbachev quietly said, "Let them have their hill." 2 years later, Lithuanian students began to demonstrate for independence. The Berlin wall fell that same year. (THE ART OF PILGRIMAGE: THE SEEKER'S GUIDE TO MAKING TRAVEL SACRED, p. 45-46, via PULPIT RESOURCE, Oct-Dec 2005) I put a small statue in the vestibule that I purchased at the Hill of Crosses, in case you might like to look at it. The Lithuanians know it as the Weeping Christ – they had told the communists that it was just a man weeping, but they all understood it to be Jesus, the man of sorrows, who gave meaning to their suffering – and hope.

Life marks all of us one way or the other. We call it memory. We never stop remembering our triumphs. We never stop regretting our losses. They can mark us with pride, bitterness, or, if we truly process them, with wisdom. They transform us from our small, self-centered selves into people of compassion and love. Hope is not a denial of reality. But it is also not some cheap spiritual elixir. It is not a placebo infused out of nowhere. Hope is a series of small actions that transform darkness into light. It is putting one foot in front of the other when we can find no reason to do so at all.

A Native American tale tells of the elder who was talking to a disciple about tragedy. The elder said, "I feel as if I have 2 wolves fighting in my heart. One wolf is the vengeful, angry, bitter, violent one. The other wolf is the loving, compassionate one." The disciple asked, "But which wolf will win the fight in your heart?" And the elder answered, "It depends on which one I feed."

Apocalyptic writing tells us to feed the hope that comes out of despair. Hope is not something to be found outside of us. It lies in the spiritual life we cultivate within. The whole purpose of wrestling with God is

to be transformed into the self we are meant to become, to step out of the confines of our false securities and allow our creating God to go on creating. In us. NEVER give up hope. Amen. (last part adapted from Joan Chittister, SCARRED BY STRUGGLE, TRANSFORMED BY HOPE)

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