

Apocalypse Wow! (An Advent Story)

Rodrigo Emilio Solano-Quesnel

Intern Minister

First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto

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N.B.—These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship—supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer—and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

Being a bookseller has its perks: you get to hang around with good friends: the ones that sit on the shelves and the ones on the sales floor that help you put what's on the shelves into customers' hands. For over half a decade, I lived what, by some measures, was a dream job, taking the treasures of wisdom that covered a store from wall to wall, and hanging around with people who were similarly passionate about the product—the service—that we were offering people.



Another perk of the bookseller life is that once in a while you get to meet the people behind the magic of those pieces of literature: bumping into John Ralston Saul on Halloween, lunch with Christine Blatchford, shooting the breeze with Miriam Toews. I have especially fond memories of a lunch with Montreal author Nicolas Dickner, you might know him for his award-winning book *Nikolski*. On that particular lunch, we were discussing his new book, *Apocalypse for Beginners*, a fictional work, with autobiographical details, about two sweethearts obsessed with the ending of their worlds.

When it came up, in our conversation, that I was in seminary, his eyes lit up. He had taken a class in biblical studies and was eager to share his insights... I confirmed that I had come across the scriptures in my studies and had been getting better acquainted with them. The prophets were obsessed with apocalypse, he remarked, the perils they were in and the opportunities in times to come—not much different from

us, he quipped. He reminisced about his 80s childhood, when schoolyard conversation involved detailed talk about shelters and missile range and the forlorn inevitability that seemed given.

I remember those schooldays in the 80s, in my case, hanging out in the playground in a Mexico City school, exchanging doom and gloom gossip with classmates after going down the slide. Everyone knew the difference between A-bombs and H-bombs, yields and consequences... everyone was usually wrong on the specs, but the moral of the story was usually that using any of these would be a bad idea. We would kick around the layout of the shelters that we assumed were set up for the inevitable fallout showdown that was bound to happen anytime. We didn't really realize how off we were with our suppositions... we didn't realize how eerily spot on we came to the risks.

The story of Stanislav Petrov terrifies me and inspires me in odd ways. Petrov was the officer in command of the Soviet early-warning setup on September 26, 1983. When the alarms started going off and the system reported five missiles headed toward the motherland, the response scenario he himself had worked on got alarmingly real. With bells and lights and yells around him as he held the telephone under his chin, he had few minutes to decide on his report to upper command—the folks in charge of retaliation.

In a moment of clarity, he realized that the numbers didn't add up. Five missiles were not the full all-out attack they were expecting, and the system had been notoriously unreliable before. It had to be a false alarm, he concluded. Upper command did not advise retaliation, turned off the alarms, and complained to Petrov that his paperwork wasn't filled out properly. It turned out some sunlight reflected on clouds had tripped the alarm.

When Petrov got home, his wife asked him what he had done at work that day. "I did nothing."

In the Russian language, I find an endearing poetry in the fact that its word for Earth—*mir*—is also its word for peace—*mir*. *Miro mir* is the message on Christmas cards in Russian: peace on Earth.

And as the Advent season approaches, I find myself thinking on its dual role as a time for remembrance and expectation, commemorating an ancient date when, as the story goes, a fellow was introducing

counterintuitive ideas on new ways of thinking about the world, its purpose, and on getting along with one's neighbour. Commemorating while anticipating some fulfillment of the perennial promise of peace on earth, of which the Christmas story seems to offer a glimpse.

This year, another date lies toward the end of Advent: the ending of the Maya long count on December 20, 2012—this upcoming solstice—has prompted much speculation about future cataclysmic events. The scholarship on the significance of the long count ending is actually quite vague on any specific predictions, and there is little evidence on outright world-ending prophecies. It has been suggested that the ending of a cycle such as a calendar count, nevertheless heralds an opportunity for growing worldwide awareness and to re-evaluate our relationship with world changes that are quite real and measurable today, being that there is no shortage of environmental, military, and economic challenges that are facing the entire planet at this particular moment.

These are angst-ridden times—and not the first time this sort of thing happens. But I find much inspiration in the glimpses of hope that have transpired at other times when the world was ending.

Many of us have heard the story of that special Christmas Eve almost a century ago, when soldiers crossed no-man's land to share a smoke with their counterparts in 1914. For a moment, the spell of their commanders was suspended and, much to their superiors' displeasure, the soldiers let go, if only momentarily of the expectations of a global system that had little bearing on their individual purpose to hang out with other chums, sing Christmas Carols, and show off pictures of the sweethearts back home.

There is a sequel to that story. A less publicized story of another Christmas Eve, in another World War, as it was becoming clear that the Third Reich would not prevail, in the Battle of the Bulge. Fritz Vincken, a boy at the time, tells his childhood story, of the last Christmas of World War II, when he and his mother were disappointed that dad hadn't been back, and it looked like the fattened chicken—whom they had called Hermann, after Hermann Goring—was going to live a few more days.

But then, three soldiers from the Allied side stumbled upon a German woman's home. They had been lost, hungry, and cold, and one of them was wounded. Without thinking about the consequences for

high treason, she welcomed them in, tended to their frostbite, and told her son to go fetch Hermann... and some potatoes.

And *then*, two officers of the Third Reich stumbled into the house, lost, hungry, and cold. The threat of high treason was once again in the radar, but before the German soldiers could come up with a response, she sternly welcomed them in, commanded them that there would be no killing in her house that night, and showed them the pile of wood where they could check in their weapons.

The smell of roast chicken may have softened their demeanour, and soon the five soldiers shared Hermann the rooster, in the company of their hostess and her son. Before they parted the next morning, one of the German officers, who had had medical training, tended to the wounded American, and they even gave directions to the allies on how to avoid the remaining Nazi hideouts.

Let us not kid ourselves, behind this heart-warming narrative is a war that still ended with two nukings. But for moments at a time, people across trenches and at a dinner table caught a glimpse of what things could be like when a spell is lifted from them. It is these moments of enhanced awareness, of divine clarity, that I believe lie at the heart of the apocalyptic message.

Enhanced awareness can be an elusive state.

A state when the veil lifts and bits of all the awesomeness and terror of our reality are revealed such that the world, in all its wonder and awfulness becomes just a bit clearer. A moment when there is a glimpse of the life behind the veil of habitual life, of the promise and the pitfalls of reality. A moment of revelation... the Greek language has a word for that: *apokalypsis*.

It is difficult to speak of apocalypse without mentioning the Book of Revelation. In it, as the story goes, in a moment of enhanced awareness, on a Sunday, John of Patmos, finds a moment of clarity with a vision for what the future holds, and he writes it in a book. The description is, as some scholars might say, trippy. And with an odd chronology of cataclysmic events, and extreme violence, the world that John knew is gone. Amid his vivid descriptions, the moral of the story is sometimes overshadowed. Spoiler alert: the book is supposed to have

a happy ending, with a new earth, in which there is peace and people take care of creation.

He is not the only or the first to do so.

Repeatedly, the prophets of the Hebrew scriptures show disdain for a world in which rulers are corrupt, injustice runs rampant, and the outcast are mistreated. They offer a better alternative, with notions that run contrary to the accepted wisdom.

On the covers of your order of service, there is a photograph of Mica, the cat. She is reading the book of Micah, the prophet, who is purported to have put forth some zany ideas: for people to beat their swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks; where nation shall not lift sword against nation, and people ain't gonna study war no more. Others speak of unthinkable scenarios like lions and gazelles hanging around, wolves and sheep taking easy with each other. What I have heard scholars refer to as the petting zoo scenario.

These are descriptions of unthinkable scenarios, like Allies and Nazis eating chicken together, tending to each others' wounds; soldiers crossing no man's land to get a haircut across the trenches for a couple of cigarettes, with little common language beyond the chorus of *Stille Nacht—Silent Night*.

These are all people who have lived their own apocalypses. In all senses of the word. Modern day prophets give similarly dire, immediate, and cautiously optimistic accounts. In *A Short History of Progress*, Ronald Wright describes several previous civilizations as they have grown and disintegrated. Jared Diamond shares this fascination in his books *Guns, Germs and Steel* and *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*.

Consistently, civilizations of old, like Ancient Rome and the Maya, faced serious challenges with their skills in handling scarcity of resources, environmental depletion, and military crises with their neighbours. Ronald Wright remarks that with each civilizational implosion, the stakes get higher, risks and starker, and the possibilities for awareness and action so much more promising. Jared Diamond, shares his optimism. Amid his view of civilizations that died, he finds evidence of those that thrived upon realizing the effects of their actions

and leading drastic changes to their established ways of thinking and acting.

The lessons that Jared Diamond describes from previous civilizational collapses are specific to that civilization's story, but the overarching lesson is quite clear, drastic changes in thinking are key; changes by which the spell of an established system makes way for new visions.

In two Christmas Eves, in two World Wars, mortal enemies let go of the spell that had been imposed on them by their armies, and by a world social order that had grown complacent about the conventional way of solving disputes—relentless mass violence. Amid those chants of *Stille Nacht* in the trenches, and at a table over a roast chicken, people proved, if only for a night, that that spell can be lifted.

These stories are sacred glimpses that lift the veil imposed by despair and short-sighted apparent solutions, giving way instead to a new and refreshing vision of how things could be. Revealing a world where justice shall roll down like waters, and peace like an ever flowing stream. A world where people seek a greater understanding of the people around them, of the people after them.

A world that is good.

A world that is very good.

So may it be, alleluia!

Amen.