

Do we live in apocalyptic times?

By [A. Katherine Grieb](#)

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Even before my first cup of coffee, I often turn the radio on to check the weather report for the day: will I need an umbrella? Should I take an extra jacket? Looking around for my coffee cup, I barely hear the voice in the background: "The sun will be darkened; and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken."

Really? Maybe I should just go back to bed. For most of us, apocalyptic imagery is the stuff of nightmares. Krister Stendahl once remarked that the Book of Revelation (also known as the Apocalypse to John) reads like the script for a horror movie.

Used as a noun, the word "apocalyptic" refers to a literary mode: it describes a style of writing where the heavenly and earthly worlds seem fused, or perhaps confused. "Apocalypse" literally means "revelation" or "unveiling." It's like the theater: the curtain or veil is drawn back, and suddenly we see things that until now were hidden from view. Imagine a cosmic curtain, drawn back by an angel of God, that suddenly reveals the world as God sees it, the world as it should be, the world as it will be in the future when God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

Readers of Mark's Gospel will recognize that such a cosmic curtain existed in ancient Israelite cosmology. In fact, the veil or curtain of the temple in Jerusalem represented that curtain: it was dark blue, adorned with silver and gold representations of the sun, the moon, and the stars. You guessed it: it symbolized the sky, the curtain that separates the heavenly realm (which is invisible to us) from

the earthly world in which we live.

In the early Christians' three-story universe--heaven above the earth and hell below--both invisible worlds were populated with angelic creatures (good or bad) and other spiritual beings, like the four living creatures of Revelation. God's heavenly throne room was in the midst of God's holy temple. In fact, the heavenly temple was the real one; the one in Jerusalem was just the earthly copy, a shadow of the true temple not made with human hands.

Twice in Mark's Gospel that heavenly curtain is ripped apart: once at the beginning, at the baptism of Jesus, when he sees the heavens "torn apart" (see Isaiah 64 to learn why); and once at the end, when Jesus dies on the cross and the veil of the Jerusalem temple is "torn in two, from top to bottom"--that is, from God's side.

But the cosmonauts in one of the earliest space shuttles announced that they had toured the heavens and did not find any evidence of God. Contemporary theologians might express this phenomenon another way: our cosmological map looks different in many ways from that of the ancient world. We may still speak poetically of the "four corners" of the earth, recognizing that at one time this idea was considered sound geography. Black holes and much of what we describe as current features of astronomy also partake of poetry, theology, and cosmology.

So do we still live in an apocalyptic world? Certainly natural disasters, which seem to behave more and more erratically, are warning us that, as Hamlet said, "the times are out of joint." And the massive displacements of people seeking a stable and peaceful life--fleeing violent, oppressive, and unstable regimes--witness to the terrors that human beings are capable of inflicting upon other human beings.

These are, of course, also opportunities to witness to God's gracious mercy in the command to love our neighbors, especially the poor and the strangers. Maybe, as Hebrews suggests, these are our angels--whom we entertain often unaware of the ways they, too, draw back the curtain to reveal the glory of God.