

Living in apocalyptic times: Reality, grief and hope

from the Tragedy and Congregations team, www.tragedyandcongregations.org.uk

As the pandemic continues to unfold around the globe, it may be helpful to think about how we are living in apocalyptic times. The word *apocalypse* means *an uncovering or revealing*. When a collective trauma happens, it is common for it to be closely followed by disturbing revelations of other traumatising realities. It is as though the lid of Pandora's Box is lifted and all kinds of things fly out. A minister is found to have engaged in misconduct and it is revealed that the treasurer has fiddled the books. The world is hit by a pandemic and the killing of George Floyd reignites the Black Lives Matter movement over the globe.

Covid-19 has revealed (and reminded us) of much: the interconnected nature of life on earth, a shameful hierarchy of value among human beings, the benefit to the earth of us pausing our activities, the vulnerability of certain groups of people, the ache of loneliness and lack of human touch....the list goes on.

Old Testament scholar and wise man Walter Brueggemann, reflecting on the impact of the destruction of Jerusalem in 587BCE, observes that in times of cataclysm there are three urgent prophetic tasks: to face into reality, to grieve the losses, and to foster hope. In that order. I would argue that these are not just prophetic but also pastoral and priestly tasks.

Reality: What is revealed is real – pay attention to it. The veil has been torn and the scales fall from our eyes. What is revealed may set the course for our future ministry together.

Grief: Grief is the antidote to denial. The Bible testifies to the power of lamentation. Name the losses (lost health, lost loved ones, lost innocence, lost ease of being in the world, lost time...). Grieve them. Or notice how your current emotional state is actually one of grieving.

Hope: Grief also opens the way to authentic hope. Not the hope that everything will be OK or go back to normal, but the sure knowledge that God is working God's purposes out amidst the chaos and pain. God is not done with us. We can rely on that. We hope for a new normal which manifests the commonwealth of God among us.

Those familiar with the myth of Pandora may recall that the last thing left in the box is Hope. The thing with feathers (Emily Dickinson). That orientation of the spirit that transcends the world and is anchored beyond its horizons (Vaclav Havel). That which *does not disappoint us because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us* (Romans 5:1-5).

Fierce with reality, unafraid to shed a tear and with hope in our rucksacks, we press on.....

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Resources: Walter Brueggemann (2014) *Reality, Grief, Hope: Three Urgent Prophetic Tasks* (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.); and (2020) *Virus as a Summons to Faith: Biblical Reflections in a Time of Loss, Grief, and Uncertainty* (Eugene OR: Cascade Books).