

I was browsing through the newspaper the other day and noticed an advertisement for a new movie, set in the year 2012. The movie depicts a cataclysmic end to the world—earthquakes, tidal waves, solar flares. All manner of calamity. I hope it's true. Our sons will be in college in 2012 and if the world ends Joan and I will save a lot of money on tuition.

But people are actually believing this. I was reading a story the other day on the ABC News website about a man in France named Geryl who quit his job so he could prepare himself for the end of the world. He's stockpiling water, gas masks, and garden seeds, and plans to move to a mountain in Africa so the tidal waves can't reach him. A reporter asked Geryl what he would do if the world didn't come to an end in 2012, and Geryl said, "My predictions are so spectacular, they can't possibly be wrong." I don't think Geryl's cornbread is quite done in the middle.

In one of my early churches there was a man named Tom who believed the end of the world was near. Every week during Sunday school he would stand and talk about how we were living in the final days. In his case, it turned out to be true. He died shortly after I left.

Tom talked incessantly about the end of the world. He was thrilled at the prospect of Jesus coming down from heaven on the clouds to separate the sheep from the goats. He believed I was a goat. Tom was very pessimistic, very gloomy, a prophet of doom, but would talk about how his faith made him happy and filled him with joy, though I never saw any evidence of that.

Isn't it interesting how often these predictions of catastrophe are rooted in religion? Religion makes some people so pessimistic. Instead of filling them joy and hope, it fills them with misery and despair. Healthy spirituality ought to have just the opposite effect—it should give us hope and help us see beauty and potential, not ugliness and doom.

“I have come,” Jesus said, “that you might have life, and have it abundantly.” Jesus said he taught what he did so that his joy would be in us, and our joy would be full. This is the aim of life in the Spirit, to have joy, to have hope. Jesus showed us what such a life looked like, with his contagious joy, his generous spirit, his broad love, his deep compassion. You know, some people get religion and start seeing sin everywhere. It's all they see, sin and more sin. Human failure and divine wrath. Evil and apocalypse and last days.

But other people have an encounter with God and they are filled with optimism and love and purpose, they see the potential in others and themselves. Where others see vice, they see virtue.

And you know what happens? People almost always live up to, or down to, the expectations others have for them. I had two grandmothers. One grandmother tended to be negative, gloomy, and pessimistic, and we could never quite please her. So after awhile we stopped trying. My other grandmother was loving, positive, and optimistic. She thought her family and friends were the most wonderful, capable people on earth. So whenever we were around her we acted like the most wonderful, capable people on earth. They were both Christian women, both active in the church, but one woman's religion caused her to hone in on failure, while the other's vision of God caused her to see goodness and grace.

This past week I went down to Tennessee and Kentucky to speak at libraries and had the opportunity to reconnect with some friends. On Thursday night, after speaking, I went out to dinner with some Episcopalian friends, a wonderful couple who've lived a nightmare the past two years. Two years ago, on Thanksgiving Day, their 25-year-old son was killed.

He was an exceptional young man. Bright, kind-hearted, good-humored, very loving young man. Then a car he was riding in hit a tree and he was killed. I had spoken on the phone with this couple several times over the past two years, and exchanged cards and letters, but this was the first time I had seen them since the death of their son. I was looking forward to seeing them, but I was a little anxious too, because I knew we'd be talking about their son and it would be painful and I felt bad for them. And we did talk about their son. It was obvious they felt their loss deeply and profoundly. But it was also obvious they hadn't given in to bitterness and despair. I can't imagine going on after something like that, but they have, and are not only going on, but going on with a renewed commitment to life in honor of their son.

Driving home, I thought of Tom in my old church, how he kept saying the world was going to come to an end. Well, he was partly wrong and partly right. The world didn't come to an end once-and-for-all-for-everyone the way he thought it would. But sometimes our individual worlds come to an end. People we love die. We suffer and hurt. We experience deep pain and loss. The world as we know it, life as we know it, comes to an end. Then we have to decide how we'll respond, with pessimism and gloom, or with optimism and faith.

When I left my friends, they hugged me and thanked me for meeting with them, said it had done them a world of good. But I was the one who was blessed. I got to see two people experience the deepest loss someone ever can and respond with grace and hope and courage. Every now and then, the curtains part and we get to see inside a soul and sometimes what we see is so beautiful it takes the breath away.

What do you see when you look at the world?