

“A Sudden End of All Who Live on Earth”

by Edward Tverdek, OFM

I knew Gene by virtue of a shared political conviction—or so I thought. Some thirty years ago, we were among a handful of people in the Chicago area who would charter a local “Committee of Correspondence”—the cryptic name adopted by similar groups around the U.S. who considered themselves part of the fledgling “Green” movement of radical environmentalists and who eschewed the hierarchical structures of “mainstream” environmental groups as inimical to the cause. Our common interest was expressed, years before a ubiquitous Internet and social media made political organizing virtually instantaneous, in a letter to a P.O. box in Minnesota, where some benevolent soul would in turn put nearby Green sympathizers in touch with each other.

My only recollection of Gene is that he was a proponent of the “Gaia Hypothesis,” a theory that posits the planet as a conscious, integrated living organism that can “willfully” adapt to the conditions foisted upon it by its various life forms—most notably, we featherless bipeds with opposable thumbs and a taste for fossil fuels. One day, Gene opined, Gaia will just swallow us all up and “correct” the blight that humanity has been to the planet. I pointed out to Gene that there are millions of folks who have a negligible effect on the planet, who in fact struggle day-to-day to merely feed their families and protect them from the elements. Should they be swallowed up too? Should they be made to pay twice, denied the benefits of industrial capitalism and later doomed because of *our* excessive use of it? “We are a species,” Gene intoned, “and as a species we will be judged.”

Mercifully, the conception of earth as a sort of indiscriminate mass executioner never quite caught on, and the notion that “Gaia” will justifiably dispatch us all like an annoying rash is now largely a misanthropic artifact of modern environmentalism’s adolescence.

For the faithful, however, a God who levels the landscape and begins again—individual culpability be damned—is not so far-fetched. Hebrew Scripture is punctuated with scenarios where the God of the covenant either acts or at least *threatens* to wipe the slate clean and start from scratch, taking down the humble and loyal along with the idolaters, the adulterers, the fattened wealthy who turn their backs on the poor, and the downright evil. The Flood narrative of Genesis 7 sees the threat come to fruition, but the prophetic texts of the Old Testament also invoke universal punishments beyond the scope of the covenant with the Israelites. In some instances, other nations fall under scrutiny when the Israelites sin, and it is by no means clear on what grounds they are being judged at all: Edom has no particular promises to keep with the one true God, so why should Edomites suffer in a global destruction piqued by the Israelite’s infidelities?

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Zephaniah provides us a lucid example of this wide-angle wrath. The Hebrew prophets in general are notorious for their seemingly bipolar tendencies, warning one minute of God's irrevocable ire, the next minute singing the persuasive powers of repentance. Zephaniah intensifies these "contradictions," alternately focusing the LORD's attention on the surviving southern kingdom yet at other times indicting the world at large, promising "a sudden end of all who live on earth" (as in 1:18). At still other moments, the prophet anticipates the preservation of a "remnant" that will survive the coming destruction. Contemporary scholars are thus divided on how to interpret Zephaniah's prophecy: is it an ad hoc "explanation" of the Babylonian invasion and the destruction of Judah ("the world" of the Israelites) or a failed forecast of more literal, worldwide devastation? Does biblical prophecy *interpret* what is already happening (or has happened), or does it merely anticipate the consequences?

Neither of these interpretations, of course, would be "correct"; biblical exegesis doesn't lend itself to such pronouncements. But that's the point, isn't it? If Sacred Scripture is to guide us, to inspire us millennia after it was written and edited, wrestling with its ambiguities is far more fruitful than expounding its putative "certainties." Zephaniah's prophecy may well be a heartfelt plea to the nation of Judah: return to the covenant, lest we be swept away with the rest of the world. It may be more of a political tract: unite now around the covenant and the law, for our survival in this world is threatened by foreign powers. Indeed, it may well be a message to all nations: you have squandered my patience and my good will; I, the LORD, will start again. Whichever of these interpretations we adhere to, the questions themselves are timeless.

Today's Prophets

An April 18, 2017, BBC.com headline proclaims rather ominously: "How Western Civilization Could Collapse." The author, Rachel Nuwer, recounts recent work of scholars such as Thomas Homer-Dixon who have built their careers assessing current conditions and projecting them several decades into the future. Despite superficial similarities, this is of course not the same thing as the prophecy of Scripture, where one is called by God to deliver God's message; it is just that the biblical prophetic message often involves an exhortation to self-reflection and conversion—*perhaps* to stave off a desolate future, but not necessarily so.

One who finds some solace in reading the Hebrew prophets might encounter articles such as the BBC piece and wonder: should a "remnant" of humanity survive the coming catastrophes—by merit or by blind luck—will they look back on writings of people like Homer-Dixon and Nuwer and struggle with their meaning in the same way we struggle with interpreting the message of the prophets who preached centuries before us, in a world far less capable of self-destruction? There was no literal "sudden end of all who live on earth" that Zephaniah spoke of, though we read him now as less a prognosticator than a preacher—one who could use vivid, apocalyptic imagery to make his point. That his words survive today and inspire us as Scripture suggest that even the generations immediately succeeding him were less concerned about the accuracy of his "predictions" than the exhortative power of his message of repentance and his assurance that the God of the Israelites was ultimately a God of mercy.

Our contemporaries predicting global climate disaster, on the other hand, are most assuredly prognosticating on our planetary fate. They will either be right or wrong about that. If, like my old colleague Gene, they anticipate no survivors, there won't be anyone left to marvel at their accuracy. If they can foresee a "remnant" of humanity surviving, however, those individuals will no doubt consider whether or why they merited their longevity. And they will ask themselves whether the predictions of global catastrophe that their forbearers circulated and routinely ignored were a political warning intended to reverse ship or a cynical admonition to abandon it. Should they still have access to the texts of the Hebrew prophets, perhaps they'll be able to interpret the message with more nuance.

I want to suggest that today's prophets are not necessarily the ones predicting doom and catastrophe in the future, however much that doom and catastrophe may be inevitable on our current path. Ecological malaise is not strictly an end result that threatens the longevity of *our* comfortable Western, post-industrial way of life in the long run, and it makes no more sense to pitch it that way than it would for Zephaniah to simply caution the wealthy elite of Judah to curb their appetites and ration consumption of their earthly riches for the longer haul. Ecological malaise is here *now* if you are among the people of this earth struggling to secure food for tomorrow. For them, the rising temperature of the oceans is no more an indicator of environmental "alarm" than is the current market price of wheat or maize. To lecture the affluent on their extravagant lifestyles is only half the battle if it leaves us believing that the point is to preserve that affluence for a few more years. Today's prophetic voice must be the one that, much like Zephaniah's, reminds us that a divine flick of the global reset button—this time minus *homo sapiens*—would be scarcely worse than what we have now, if what we have now is a conscious rejection of what we believe to be God's will for God's creation.

Suppose you had somehow lost the ability to feel the searing pain we normally feel when staring directly at the sun. You might find it a pleasant, even enrapturing experience to gaze into the beauty of the solar display. Nonetheless, you would be damaging your retinas beyond repair within the first minute. Any number of people might counsel you to stop, warning you that you'll regret the consequences later. Such are today's politicians, "thought leaders," TED-talkers, and cable-news pundits. We have no shortage of public figures capable of admonishing us to heed the remote, potential consequences of what we do. Little changes.

What we need, perhaps, are prophets who can help us feel the pain again—to regain the sense of discomfort we rightly *ought* to be feeling *now*.