The Way the World Ends: An Essay on Cross and Eschatology

Vítor Westhelle
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago

Beginning

For the last eleven years, since I resumed teaching in an academic setting after being a parish pastor and working for the Ecumenical Pastoral Commission on Land in Brazil, my reflections have been, to a significant extent, an attempt to reread theology from the point of view of those years when I did grassroots work. I am fully aware that a point of view is always a view from a point. So I don’t claim my experience to be in any sense universal. I don’t presume to have with it the hermeneutic key to theology in general. As Brazilian poet Vinicius de Moraes once said: “Ninguém é universal fora de seu quintal” (Nobody is universal outside their backyard).

However, that experience raised in me the awareness of a deficit or a blind spot in western theological thinking that hindered me from reflecting theologically on some very existential and pastoral topics I was encountering: small farmers driven off their land, landless peasants living year after year in plastic tents on the side of highways, squeezed between the roadway and the fences of the underutilized farms nearby.

It all started when I was still a parish pastor and was commissioned to write the chapter on Creation for the systematic compendium entitled Lift Every Voice. There I brought up the category of “space” as an indispensable theologumenon. Since then I have written on several theological loci taking that insight into account. And they did not pass fully unnoticed by the theological community. Some theologians have taken up my argument and raised significant questions that have led me to the theme of this lecture. Two of them are exemplary. José Míguez Bonino in his book Faces of Protestantism in Latin America suggests that “a Trinitarian vision of this theme [I suggested] could provide an adequate theological key” for the reconstruction of theology, but he asks me if I would not be giving up the biblical eschatological vision of the future of God.¹ Catherine

This is the puzzle I am working with: How does time take place?

Keller, in her book Apocalypse Now and Then, recognizes and commends me for the same insight but notes that I seem “all too trustful of the apocalyptic-move, indeed even translating it into the later doctrine of creatio ex nihilo.” Such a move, she says, threatens to become “utopianized in just the sense Westhelle wishes to oppose.” Instead, she suggests a “counter-apocalyptic” that would “translate the notion of creation out of that absolute origin into that of perpetual origination.”

Apparently I am being criticized for exactly opposite reasons—one for not taking eschatology seriously enough, and another for carrying it to apocalyptic extremes. But in a certain sense both have recognized important points in my argument that I would like to underscore. Keller is right in pointing out a recurring apocalyptic theme that runs through my argument (although I think I never used the word) and indeed goes against her suggestion of a “perpetual origination.” Míguez-Bonino does detect a departure from a certain eschatological vision. However, I would like to argue that it is a departure from a western view of history and of eschatology but not from a biblical view of the eschaton, even if the former has been inscribed upon the latter. The task I impose myself in this lecture is that of explaining how can I hold an apocalyptic vision that is not utopian, but localized, related to time and space—and therefore relevant to our present situation—and faithful to the biblical witness. It is the realization that I had this task in front of me that led me in the last few years to work on a theological topic that has become crucial for sustaining my argument: the cross. Its absence in my essays that Míguez-Bonino and Keller were commenting on, I came to realize, is probably the reason for their reading of my argument in ways I did not intend.

This is my beginning. In what follows I will speak of time, space, cross, and home, and then I will end.

Time

“What is time?” “Where is tomorrow?” These are questions that Peter Høeg in his novel Borderliners pursues relentlessly, telling in an autobiographical fiction the story of institutionalized children that did not fit socially. They were “borderliners.” What does time mean for those who are on the edge? The book examines and questions conceptions of linear time running across the Newtonian universe, or the in-born category of a Kantian mind. Were these the only meanings of time, then, for borderliners, time is a machine that nudges “out toward the edge of the abyss.” How to think about time when one knows that at the limit it either loses its meaning or pushes you over the edge? Time has different velocities in our experiences of it. It can be

---


the ecstatic experience of a *kairos* or the relentless movement of a rhythmic *chronos*. But these are only extremes in a spectrum of countless other velocities that intersect our experiences depending on where we are. I needed this language of Høeg that touches upon poetry in order to detect the abstract character time has assumed in modern theological prose. And I need the probing of Sethe, the character on the edge in Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved*, when she says:

> I was talking about time. It’s so hard for me to believe in it. Some things go. Pass on. Somethings just stay. I used to think it was my memory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it’s not. Places, places are still there . . . not just in my memory, but out there, in the world . . . I mean even if I don’t think it, even if I die [it] . . . is still out there. Right in the place where it happened. (pp. 35–36)

This is the puzzle I am working with: how does time *take place*? What is the time of salvation, of trial, of condemnation? *Where* does it happen? Or doesn’t it also *take place*? What do theologians say about it?

Although figures like Karl Barth or Karl Rahner might have had more impact in their respective theological traditions, Barth in Protestant theology and Rahner in Roman Catholicism, it is arguable that it is Paul Tillich who in this century made a greater impact in both theology and cultural life in the western world. His simultaneous impact on both areas is due to the fact that unlike other great theological minds he dipped and soaked the core of his theology into the cultural milieu of the middle of this century and learned as few others how to read the “signs of times” on both sides of the North Atlantic world. Unlike Barth’s prescription to have the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in another, Tillich en-coded the Bible into the newspaper, or vice versa. He is, therefore, a good candidate for anyone to consult on what the West perceives as the basic challenges theology faces and what is the theological agenda to be pursued. What he saw became the explicit agenda of much of theology and, sometimes, the tacit one. The explicit agenda was the one in which his contributions were controversial within the theology of the West and therefore openly debated, like his Christology, his expressivist theory of symbol, his method of correlation, and so forth. What interests me here is to look at the tacit or implicit agenda that he laid out and was never much debated, I assume, precisely because it was taken as a truism, something that was largely self-evident, a commonplace shared by the prevailing culture in the North Atlantic world.

Tillich, who understood himself as being on the borders and used in his systematic theology a plethora of other spatial metaphors like dimensions, depth, limits, and structure, was the very same person who wrote an essay about the struggle between time and space. In a typical binary western approach, Tillich sets the two categories against each other and lines up other binary oppositions in which Christianity sides with time and paganism with space. The predominance of *time* gives rise to prophecy and monotheistic faith; *space* gives rise to tragedy, mysticism, and polytheism. History and the church universal are on the side of justice; the rule of space is nationalism and tribalism producing injustice, it is the victory of naturalism over the spirit. And so on and so forth. There is

Place, locale, cannot be circumvented. God's revelation requires place.

hardly any reason for getting intrigued by Tillich's motivation to debunk space from Christian theology. Tillich is reflecting implicitly his own traumatic experience with National Socialism and its ideology of blood and soil, of Aryan purity combined with the nationalistic concept of Lebensraum (living or vital space). Yet we should be reminded, abusus non tollit usus (abuse does not suspend the use).

In spite of many metaphorical uses of space in contemporary theology, Tillich's diatribe against space, and in favor of time, has received very little attention in theological literature until very recently. And I suspect that this is not the case because Tillich was seen as being completely off the mark, which he hardly was as both an incisive observer of culture and an amazingly well informed philosophical theologian. The reason, I suggest, is the opposite. He was playing a key or composing a melody that was in consonance with the cultural symphony of his time and his place. He only formulated a virtual consensus: God's revelation happens in history regardless of geography. At least that is what one of the most disturbing and incisive critics of modern western culture, Michel Foucault, has noted. He recalls in an anecdote "having been invited ... by a group of architects to do a study of space ... and at the end of the study someone spoke up [and tried to] ... firebomb me saying that space is reactionary and capitalist, but history and becoming are revolutionary." That any one could even think about setting these categories of time and space against each other, relativity theory notwithstanding, reveals the disembedded character of our existence and its symbolic systems to describe western modernity.

Space

In a 1975 dissertation, for the first time in my knowledge, a basic question was raised regarding the adequacy of using time-bound or exclusively historical categories to interpret the biblical view of God's action and presence in the world. It was written by an Eritrean theologian, Yacob Tesfai. In "This is my Resting Place: An Inquiry into the Role of Time and Space in the Old Testament," he criticizes modern western biblical theology, canonized by the work of Gerhard von Rad, that God's actions and God's revelation are to be seen as God's intervention in universal history for which the locale of God's epiphany is only circumstantial. Tesfai's analysis shows a curious development in modern western ways of thinking: the separation of time from space. In the biblical world, says Tesfai, this would be a complete oddity.

6 Comments like the following are typical of this stance: "Gott handelt in der Geschichte und gibt sich dadurch den Menschen zu erkennen. Mittel der Offenbarung Gottes ist also nicht in erster Linie die Natur, sonder die Geschichte" (God acts in history and thereby reveals Godself to humanity. The means of the revelation of God is not in the first instance nature, but history). Evangelischer ErwachsenenKatechismus (Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1975), 218.


Time and space are "pocket-experiences." Events are at the same time temporally and spatially circumscribed. Place, locale, cannot be circumvented. God's revelation requires place.

What happens, happens in time because of a given space. And what literally takes place, takes place because the time is ripe. Anthropologist Anthony Giddens in his book *Modernity and Self-Identity* noted that in pre-modern settings "time and space were connected through the situatedness of place," while in modernity "the separation of time from space involved above all the development of an 'empty' dimension of time, the main lever which also pulled space away from place." The best illustration is the parallel and progressive divorce between the development of mechanical and then electronic clocks, on one side, and of western cartography, on the other. What the mechanical clock did was to invert the causal relationship between the rotation of the earth in relation to the sun. The analogical clock established time in analogy to the earth's rotation but without causal dependence on it (as with a sundial), so that we have time zones and even daylight saving time. And when we get to the digital watch even the inverted analogy is no longer there. The day virtually breaks when the electronic alarm clock sounds. And maps from the fifteenth century on became homogeneous representations of extension, losing the connection with situatedness which was still present in the older itineraries. (Remnants of situated space can still be found in sixteenth-century maps, where sea monsters would mark perceived places of danger and risk.)

That it took an Eritrean to diagnose this peculiarity of western scholarship is not a coincidence. It normally takes a stranger to lift up one's own idiosyncrasies. The West since the fifteenth century did these two things: it conquered the world geographically and intellectually, and it justified this conquering with a notion of history that was regarded as the parchment on which the adventures of western men (sic) were inscribed as deeds of universal history. In the words of Tzvetan Todorov, "'to discover' is an intransitive action." Incidentally, the word "discover" and its etymological cognates in western languages (entdecken, descobrir, découvrir, discovrire, etc.) was first used to describe a landfall only in the sixteenth century to account for the Portuguese and Spanish maritime explorations (and was shortly thereafter used by John Donne to describe a sexual encounter in his infamous poem "To My Mistress Going to Bed"). The rest of the world became a parchment to which the deeds of the West would extend themselves without limit, only the rest of the world did not know it. In the words of Karl Löwith, *Weltgeschichte* was read as *Heilsgeschichte*, world history was the register of saving events.

---


11 "O my America, my new found land, / My kingdom, safeliest when with one man manned, / My mine of precious stones, my empire, / How blessed am I in this discovering thee. / To enter in these bonds is to be free, / Then where my hand is set my seal shall be," John Donne, *The Oxford Authors*, ed. John Carey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 12–13.

That there were no limits meant exactly that "discovery" became an intransitive verb. What was discovered did not make a difference, except that it was incorporated into a historically preordained logic. Hegel, exactly after discussing the conquering of the Americas, gives expression to this conviction with his famous statement: "Europe is definitely (schlechthin) the end of world history."\(^{13}\) Schleiermacher, Hegel’s colleague and foe at the University of Berlin in the beginning of the nineteenth century, shares at least this in common with the philosopher. Arguing that there are no new heresies, for since antiquity Christianity was no longer challenged or infiltrated by other religious ideas, he shows that the missionary efforts of the church followed the same pattern of "discovery." Because there were no longer limits, therefore, there is no possible transgression. One needs a limit to be able to transgress, a "beyond" to trespass. What others thought or believed did not make any difference, for Christianity became the universal name for religion in its purest positive manifestation. In these circumstances, he writes, "... new heresies no longer arise, now that the Church recruits itself out of its own resources; and the influence of alien faiths on the frontier and the mission-field of the Church must be reckoned at zero."\(^{14}\) Where heresy is no longer possible, novelty is also an impossibility. The word "heresy" etymologically means "a choice," "option," or "setting apart," but it can also mean "conquest," "capture." The irony in this is that the European or western conquering of the world, the great "heresy," became the norm from which no deviation would be possible, no "anti-heresy" would be allowed. Heresy became absolute, normative.

But all of this does not mean a desacralization or profanization of all spaces, locales, things, and bodies. In fact, the very opposite is the case. Columbus is here proverbial. His justification for conquering and plundering the New World was that it was done for the sake of amassing the resources to launch a Crusade to conquer the Holy House of Jerusalem.\(^{15}\) Sacred spaces and sacred things were now understood within this same story in which time and space are held apart. Sacred spaces, like chastity, are hardly more than markers to define by default what can be plundered and raped. A sacred thing is a cipher for all the rest that is disposable or is deemed disposable. A sacred thing is protected from time, while the profane is only a function of it. As long as we have sacred things, sacred places, dissociated from their epiphanic time—geography without genealogy—we will have never-ending dump sites, and places or bodies to be violated.

Take, for example, the studies of Mircea Eliade on *The Sacred and the Profane.*\(^{16}\) The distinction, he shows, emerges from the analysis of societies that demarcated their cosmos from the unknown territories and societies at their margins, the chaotic. But something happens once there is no longer the mysterious "beyond" in space, when the whole world has been colonized.\(^{17}\) The homogenization of the Earth came as a result of the establishment

---


\(^{15}\) *Diario de Colón* (Madrid: Cultura Hispánica, 1968), 139 (26 December 1492). Hegel confirms that this was well known in Europe (*Werke* 12:490).

\(^{16}\) New York: Harvest, 1959, 29–32.

\(^{17}\) Actually the true continuation of the ancient distinction between cosmos and chaos has now to be located in our fascination and awe attached to extraterrestrial speculations.
of its spherical nature and the actual conquering of it through navigation since the fifteenth century. The chaotic, the uncanny was cosmicized. Since then, the profane is separated from the sacred by an abstract act of the mind that sets those spaces, the sacred and the profane, against each other. There was always the holy, the sacred, but it was defined by the religious experience as such; it was the predicate of a hierophany and not, like now, its presupposition. It was only with Schleiermacher Speeches (1799), Durkheim's Elementary Forms of Religious Life (1912), and Otto's The Idea of the Holy (1923) that the idea of "the holy" defined religious experiences and, then, whatever else existed was deemed profane. In other words, the idea of the holy, of the sacred, and the idea of the profane is quite a recent creation.

It is in this context that eschatology as the doctrine of the last "things" becomes the teachings about the last times or of a decisive time, either in a millennialist sense of a time set in the calendar for the end of the world, or as an eternal present, a "kairotic" dormant possibility slumbering beneath the tick-tock of the clock of history. Whether, present, future, realized, inaugurated, kairotic, proleptic, consequent, or whatever interpretation eschatology has received, it has been purged from the disturbing undecidability of the biblical view of the eschaton. The word eschaton in Greek can mean something that happens in time, but it can also describe rank, the last in a series, as it can also be descriptive of the outer limit of a place. When we translate the term now it receives a single, definite meaning referring either to a place or to a time. But even when the context suggests one meaning, like "being witnesses ... to the end of the world" (heos eschatou tès ges), which in our translations receives an exclusively geographical connotation, in the ears of the early Christians it very likely also suggested something that could be equally well translated as "until the end of the earth," suggesting a temporal connotation. It is only we who need to think of an either/or.

Can we step outside of the modern western predicament of thinking into this binary separation between time and space? Can we along with the signs of the times, as the poet and bishop Pedro Casaldáliga suggested, consider the signs of places? Do we realize that the time of judgment always

19 With these words Bultmann closes The Gifford Lectures 1955: "Always in your present lies the meaning in history, and you cannot see it as spectator, but only in your responsible decisions. In every moment slumbers the possibility of being the eschatological moment. You must awaken it." Rudolf Bultmann, The Presence of Eternity: History and Echatology (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1957), 155.
come in a place of trial? The temptation here, of course, is to fall back into the binary opposition and just revert the axiological values and say space is good and time is bad. But this would be nothing else than reinstating exactly the same problem. How can we think differently, but not in a different way we might be able to think, but thinking differently by way of an other, or “thinking through others”?[^20]

Cross

In his long poem, called “The Book of Monastic Life,” Rainer Maria Rilke has some lines that can serve as an approach to these questions:

YOUR very first word: Light:
thus made was time. Then silent you were long.

Your second word became flesh
and distressed
(darkly we are still dawning in its pitch)
and again your face is pondering.

Yet your third
I want not.[^21]

Light and darkness and the absence of a third is not unlike time and space and the absence of a place that, consumed by an event, is at the same time a no-place, where presence (parousia) and absence (apousia) are one and the same. Can we think this last thing? Can this thing be the unthinkable: the naked God exposed in the middle of the day when suddenly night falls and agony and death impose a dreadful absence? Calvary, the place of the skull, the no-place, the skull, the no-face, where what happens is only annihilation. And yet was not that the place and the time of salvation? Second-century writer Melito of Sardis still testified to this impossibility of a “third”:

He that hung up the earth in space was Himself hanged up; He that fixed the heavens was fixed with nails; He that bore up the earth was borne up on a tree; the Lord of all was subjected to ignominy in a naked body—God put to death! . . . Alas for the new wickedness of the new murder! The Lord was exposed with naked body: He was not deemed worthy even of covering; and, in order that He might not be seen, the luminaries turned away, and the day became darkened, because they slew God, who hung naked on the tree.[^22]

There is no theology of the cross, at least not in the sense of being a disciplined and organized discourse about the cross and Christ’s passion. The cross is the crucial point in time and space in which the third option is absent—yet somehow there. How to express it? How to name it? Language fails us. And yet we must speak; we must transgress the impossibility of language.

Let me call this transgression of language an apocalyptic gesture. I will be using the word “apocalyptic” here not as a literary genre, but rather to designate the precise sense of conveying this crossing of time and space in which there is this simultaneous coincidence, a clenching, a concoction of opposites (what Nicolas of Cusa

[^20]: DEIN allererstes Wort war: Licht: / da ward die Zeit. Dann schwiegst du lange. / Dein zweites Wort ward Mensch und bange / (wir dunkeln noch in seinem Klange) / und wieder sinnt dein Angesicht. / Ich aber will dein drittes nicht.” Rainer Maria Rilke, Die Gedichte (Frankfurt a/M: Insel, 1997), 227. (To Rahel Hahn my thanks for helping me with the translation of this poem, although mine is the responsibility for its accuracy.)

called *coincidentia oppositorum*, of affirmation and denial, of disclosure and concealment, of presence and absence. It is not a moment of transition, an opportunity for a syllogism, but the denial of all mediations, in which the experience of both, the end of the eon and the beginning of it, are so imminent that it suspends all transaction, all economy. The Latin equivalent to “apocalypse,” *revelatio* (hence the English “revelation”), conveys this, as much as the Greek *apokalypsis*. In one sense it is an unveiling, a laying bare, but the prefix (re- in Latin, or apo- in Greek) reserves some surprises in the undecidability of its meaning. It can be the removal of the veil, but it can also mean something else, the moving away from the veil so as to make it even more veiling, or even double veiling. The text from Melito of Sardis shows this well when the naked God, the utterly revealed God, is simultaneously the one on which the light no longer shines. The totally visible stripped down God (what Luther called the *deus nudus*) is the utter darkness in the middle of the day.

The apostle Paul, groping for language to express this impossibility, which he himself called the “apocalypse of Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 1:7), could only express it in paradoxical terms pairing notions like foolishness and wisdom, weakness and power, noble and low. He composed in the opening of the First Letter to the Corinthians a text that is striking insofar as its boldness in language is concerned but helpless insofar as any systematic effort to put order into his language and clarify the meaning of its semantics. Luther would be another example. How should we read *ad deum contra deum confungere* (“to flee to and find refuge in God against God”) if not in this undecidable apocalyptic verve?  

I here use the term “apocalyptic” to designate, then, the literal meaning of the death of God in the cross of Jesus, and in a metaphorical sense to designate our little, small, or weak apocalypses insofar as the former (the literal meaning) sheds light into, or offers an impossible language to, the understanding of our own experience of limits, of being at the edge of the abyss. The literal and the metaphorical meanings are unlike, yet they share the same linguistic impossibility. The cross of Jesus, in the words of Mary Solberg, represents an “epistemological break” with the ways we organize our knowledge of the world.  

The limit of language is also a language about limits. A spatial concern, the lifting up of the importance of locale, of place, is theologically speaking not a concern for the celebration of places, a theological version of the Sierra Club Calendar, the crowning of a theology of geography to outdo a theology of history. The spatial quest is decisive insofar as it is a quest for the limit, the borderline, the frontier, the margin, the horizon, the divide—words that define a place that is no-place, for it is only the limit of a space, but a limit intersected by a time that is equally evasive; a

---

23 WA 5.204, 26f.
time of ending which is no-time, but simultaneously the time of coming (ad-ventus) which also eludes measurement, chronometered; for what comes does not come in time, instead it comes on or upon time. What the cross does is precisely this reorientation of our gaze to the limits, the eschata. What it reveals is exactly the apocalypse which is revelation and at once its very concealment; a revelation hidden in its opposite (revelatio abscondita sub contraria specie), as Luther said in trying his hand in explaining the apocalypse of God in Jesus of Nazareth.

How to keep the gaze at that unseemly spectacle is what the apostles, so reluctantly, had to learn. It is the uncanny, the unbearable vision. We all know about this. We might have not been there when they crucified our Lord, yet we have experienced something analogous every time we run into the limits of the spaces we inhabit, the borders of our geographies. And they are legion. We know them as much as we avoid and dread them. For example, there is a psychological geography, the terrain of our gathered self, which has its limits, the point in which the self collapses. There is the geography of our body that is delimited by the point it "reveals" its dysfunction, a condition that invites our constant denial, or else threatens to turn us into hypochondriacs. And so there are ethnic, racial, social, cultural, political, economic, geopolitical, and so many other geographies that lay bare the apocalypses; the limits of the homely, the familiar, that which centers our spaces. They are often not more than small apocalypses whose weak power is yet strong enough to awaken in us the onslaught of the uncanny, the unfamiliar, the Unheimlich.

Yet, the apocalyptic message wants to convey precisely this paradox: it is at the end that a beginning is possible, it is death that brings about life, it is the awful that is also awesome, the tremendum is the fascinans. As Friedrich Hölderlin, in his poem "Patmos," wrote:

Near and hard to grasp is God.
But where danger lies, grows also that which saves.25

But do we want to be saved? Or do we long rather to be safe? Is this not the message, the lesson that we learn from that other apocalypse, the apocalypse of Jesus Christ? Between that apocalypse and ours there is a trail marked by the blood of those who have witnessed, have been martyrs (the very word we translate as "witness"), not only because they confessed Jesus, but because they themselves stood at the borderline of their own familiar, because they had learned to keep the gaze steady and read their own apocalypse in the light and the darkness of that other one that they attested to. Martyrs are needed because only they, from Stephen to Don Oscar Romero, can show us the way back to that one apocalypse that reorients us and allows us to read the signs of times and places, face the uncanny filled with hope, but which is a hope against all hope.

But, Rilke added, "your third I want not." If this is the cost of discipleship, who can be saved? How many, say, tenured professors, have left, are leaving, or are ready to leave safety behind in order to be saved? The uncanny, the apocalyptic obfuscating light and blinding darkness, the Unheimlich, this limiting space and time that is at once no space and no time, is not...

broad enough for all of us to inhabit at once, in the unlikely case we would opt for it. We have been spared, and our weak apocalypses don’t mount most of the time to a situation without remedy. We have insurance policies and psychoanalysts, community organizers and drugs, racism workshops and families, political treaties and labs, street rallies and churches, not-for-profit organizations and Sunday brunches, self-care techniques and committees, this and that, mediating detours that have spared us from or circumvented our small apocalypses; they do alleviate and buffer the impact, the concoction that apocalypses produce. There is home, at least for many of us.

Home

Indeed we have been spared—not yet saved, but spared. But at what cost? Whose blood has spared our own shedding? Whose crosses have sent us to the coziness of a home?

A little story that could be read as a modest parable for sacrifice and safety: There have been seasonal blood drives here at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. Every single time I volunteer to donate blood I have to fill out a questionnaire in which one of the questions is whether I have been in recent months in areas of the world, there listed, that are considered to be of health risk, and therefore have potentially exposed me to infectious diseases that my blood could spread further around. Every time I flunk the test and am not allowed to donate my blood. So I have been spared this “sacrifice” of giving my blood because in some corner of the world I have been to, in some eschaton tales, there are people bleeding to death of malaria, Chagas, yellow fever, AIDS, dengue, whatever name you or the World Health Organization give to these apocalypses.

It is at the end that a beginning is possible, it is death that brings about life, it is the awful that is also awesome...

And yet I am home, safe as I can feel in the south side of Chicago. And I think about the places I have been which have ironically spared me from giving a gift that would not have cost me more than some ounces of blood and a nice treatment by sympathetic nurses. This is a sort of a parable, an illustration of the story I am trying to convey, i.e., that we have been spared by some sacrifices. But is this what the apocalypse of Jesus has to tell us? Is it a tale about the need of some amount of sacrifice to be constant in the world so that we can enjoy some safety?

There is a theorem of sorts attributed to Justin the Martyr which attempts to demonstrate that the greater the number of Christian martyrs forced into the arena, an exponentially greater number of other Christians would be spared. Literary critic and philosopher René Girard earned his fame by popularizing this theorem in what he called the “scape goat” theory, according to which every society in order to relieve potentially annihilating internal strife singles out “scape goats” that embody in themselves and thus represent the causes of the contentious enmity and by their sacrifice relieve society from the consequences of an open confrontation of all against
all. But is that what we can conclude—that we have been spared only to be finally condemned, like a death-row inmate being treated for an illness so that he might, in good health, reach the day of his execution? Where is grace in this apparently unavoidable calculus of a proportional relation between sacrifice and safety?

No words, but a labor of mourning, a labor of love connects Friday and Sunday and fills the spaces of death with fragrance.

How do we get across the apocalyptic Rubicon to see a glorious new day, while we are being spared? Can we be saved, can we enjoy the hour and the place of a new creation, the glory of the fascinans and the uncanny tremendum of an empty tomb?

I was considering this question, meditating on the apocalypse of Jesus Christ, and thinking about that empty time between Good Friday and Easter Sunday; an empty time, administered by an impassive Father in heaven, in which nothing really happens; a time not to be filled, for it was an apocalyptic time. And likewise we think about the empty spaces as well; Golgotha, the place of hollow skulls, where God dies, or then the tomb found empty. And all the rest is quietness and immobility, no rush in the air, no ruach, no breath, no spirit stirring the face of the earth—or so we are led to believe.

Yet “your third I want not”? Indeed, there is not a third word to fill that time, to explain the meaning and connection between those hours that span from Friday to Sunday, if that is what the poet meant. No words. But there is fragrance in the air; a scent of spices and perfume that the women, who had seen where the body of the beloved one was laid, went to buy (Mk 16:1). And then there was a home where they went to prepare those spices and oil to anoint a decaying body (Lk 24:56). They have been spared, and on the shabbat they even rested, for there was a home and still work to be done—even in the midst of the apocalypse. No words, but a labor of mourning, a labor of love connects Friday and Sunday and fills the spaces of death with fragrance. The wind, the breath, the Spirit in those days did not utter words, but it did spread a scent countering the odor of death. There was work to be done even and above all in the midst of the apocalypse. Yet it was a work of another economy, a mad economy (or call it “grace-side economics”) that spends for a gift that could not be returned: spices for a dead and decaying body.

Those women, who have been spared in the midst of the apocalypse, saw salvation and new creation first because they gazed at the place where the beloved died and the place where the body was laid. (I have said it often that if it were not for those women Christianity would confess to apparitions of Jesus and not to the resurrection of the body.) What brings them on Sunday with oil and spices to the tomb is what Wendell Berry called the “practice of

resurrection," a labor of mourning and love, done also because there was a place called home in the midst of the apocalypse. The time is not empty, for there is an itinerary, a movement through spaces that has a very clear trajectory. The movement goes from the limit, from the end (Good Friday, the cross, the tomb), then to a center (the home, the shabbat), and then back to the margin (Sunday, the tomb revisited). We must realize that it is because of this movement, this graceful but mournful dance, this liturgy, this labor of love and mourning, that we came to know at all that there is salvation, that there is new creation that springs exactly then when the world ends, or there where the worlds end.

End

In this last of meeting places
We grope together
And avoid speech
Gathered on this beach of the tumid river

. . . . . . .

This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
Not with a bang but a whimper. 27

T. S. Eliot knew something that poets often teach theologians: how to name the unnameable. The unnameable: a broken sound of one who is forsaken, a senseless combination of tones and pitches, a whimper. Can we hear it? Can we see the places from where it comes? Might it be closer to the 63rd Street south Chicago, or to the landless peasants on the side of the roads in Brazil, than to the Y2K? Have we been there? Are we ready to return? There and then is where and when the world ends. But it is because there and then it ends, it is there and then, where and when, it also begins.
