

# The Zombie Apocalypse and the End of All Things

**Ezekiel 37:1-14**  
**Matthew 27:45-54**

**Zombie Apocalypse Series, Part 3**  
**1<sup>st</sup> Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, AL**  
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This is the third and last installment of a sermon series on a repeating modern theme, the Zombie Apocalypse. Two weeks ago we explored the anxieties in the culture that may have given rise to the modern version of the zombie monster – as found in reanimated hordes of cannibalistic, contagious corpses, threatening all civilization. We said that even if the world seems inhuman, dangerous and out of control, our hope in God’s salvation carries a divine guarantee. Last week we said the zombie metaphor raises the question of what it means to be human, with answers less obvious than you would think, but in the end we are who the One who made us says we are. That brings us to the newest wrinkle in the zombie narrative – the “apocalypse” part. Zombie invasion stories are set in end-of-the-world, “the end of life as we know it” scenarios, with a series of events that have rendered humans vulnerable and helpless. What is that about, and what does the gospel have to say on the matter?

It is obviously a life and death matter. The threat of a zombie apocalypse is death, on several levels – personally, for those you know and love, and perhaps for reality itself or any way of knowing that anything that mattered, any human history, would go on. Mathematics geeks who play with this stuff have taken these scenarios from books and films – a zombie outbreak where the zombie bites spread the contagion, and most of them calculate that it would spread so widely and so fast that it would wipe out all living humans. Hence the “apocalypse”.

Or at least the end if civilization. A contagion narrative is not new. Giovanni Boccaccio wrote following the bubonic plague in Europe in 1348. He described a society defunct, lacking any remaining civil authority (human or divine), and the total collapse of European social fabric in wide areas. Family members abandoned each other; others lost the will to live, and simply sat down to die.<sup>i</sup> Since the 14<sup>th</sup> century’s Black Plague, disease has had significant impact on world politics. That fear may drive a lot of the zombie craze.

Life and death go together. Freud even said, “The aim of all life is death.”<sup>ii</sup> Arguably, life would hold less wonder, certainly less urgency, if it was not special – if we did not know we have it only for our allotted time. Life without death would become meaningless. German philosopher Martin Heidegger reflected on this, that death provides the “arc of temporality toward which we move” and that it is this arc that makes our life real. He argues that in our everyday existence we are “cut off from the primal and primordially genuine relations of our being”<sup>iii</sup> and that death reminds us of ultimate reality. That’s what made George Romero’s zombie film *Night of the Living Dead* a horror movie – it says that death is random and without purpose. It is what makes zombies such good horror monsters – they are inauthentic beings, false humans, for whom death provided no arc or meaning to life. They are meaningless creatures. In the post-apocalyptic world, being dead, writes Kevin Boone, takes second place in awfulness to being Undead. “The living death of the zombie is more monstrous than the grave.”<sup>iv</sup> In the end, does not life have to matter? It should matter that we lived, and that we died. The horror of becoming a zombie, succumbing to the contagion, is nihilism and the meaninglessness of it.

The idea of a zombie bite being contagious was not part of the original Voodoo zombie story, but an evolution of the genre. Rodney Clapp writes that we now know enough about microbes “that can make us sick unto death for contagion to loom as a dark possibility in our crowded and diverse world.”<sup>v</sup> A zombie’s bite means catching the disease and becoming one of the undead. As I’ve said in recent weeks, the horror of zombies is less that they can destroy than that they can make us like them, as Clapp says, “soulless, brutish, a mindless part of the struggling masses that advance on us from every side.” You can pick up the morning paper or flip on the TV to see examples of mass behavior, mindless masses of people following the path of least resistance.

The contagion narrative has Biblical precedent in the concept of Original Sin. The Apostle Paula articulates most clearly the idea that sin – that is, separation or alienation from God – was spread from Adam (the original host) to all of us. The antidote, Jesus Christ himself, spreads the cure in reverse the same way.

My daughter, Hannah, is a media theorist who specializes in cultural narrative. She says “Zombie stories are almost always siege stories. The protagonists are trapped and the enemy is at the gate (or surrounding the farm, or at the doors of the shopping mall), there’s dwindling ammo, and only the other side can recruit.”<sup>vi</sup> The zombie is as mindless as a virus and can invade both the larger world around us or those closest to us in our personal space. She says, “It’s not just a virus, it’s that which we love made monstrous, turning against us.”

For how many people has that become true, about their country, their political party, their church, even their children, as the world turns and as the world changes into something different than what they always knew? In the grander scheme of things, so much seems beyond our control, and we abdicate our own collective power, throw up our hands. Will the next wave of zombie flicks have some eco-zombie theme ... the wounded earth fights back?

The “Apocalypse” theme tells us that the concern is not simply personal. Daniel Drezner, Professor of International Politics at Tufts University, writes: “A growing concern in world politics is the draining of power from purposive actors to the forces of entropy,”<sup>vii</sup> and has taken an interest in the growing zombie metaphor as applicable to his field. “The failure of humans to cooperate in the presence of reanimated corpses is a common theme that permeates the zombie canon – just as the futility of international cooperation recurs throughout the realist interpretation of history.”<sup>viii</sup> Another observer, Mohammed Silen, finds a warning in the evolution of the zombie from a creature driven by insatiable hunger, to zombies in more recent films that move fast and are driven by irrational aggression. He believes they are no longer an expression of our anxieties but “limit-breaking consequences of repression” pointing to “the inevitable eruption of crisis on a global level.”<sup>ix</sup> That is, an apocalypse.

Is the zombie metaphor an expression of that fear, or worse – something we intuit through an increasing amount of evidence? That humankind has set in place forces and systems that cannot be stopped, and that have the power to destroy us, to end all things? Whether those forces are environmental damage, climate change, someone tinkering with viruses or DNA in a lab somewhere, or the fact that an increasing number of unstable countries have nuclear weapons? Who could survive an apocalyptic event, purposeful or accidental, against which we ordinary folks are helpless?

Maybe Shaun. *Shaun of the Dead* (2004), written by Simon Pegg, Edgar Wright, Director) is an interesting movie in that everyone who sees it has a different interpretation. At one level it is a

comedic send-up, where even in the title (*Shaun of the Dead – Dawn of the Dead*) the zombie genre laughs at itself. The short version is the non-heroic protagonist has an awful day at work, decides to win back his ex-girl, and is so pre-occupied with that task he almost fails to notice that he and his friends are in the middle of a zombie outbreak that may be the apocalypse. In going about his task in his rather disordered life, Shaun almost accidentally saves himself and his friends from zombies. At the end of the film, the normal world has returned, and the remaining zombies are engaged at menial labor (busing tables) and as entertainment on TV game shows. The apocalypse didn't happen. Or did it? There is little difference between Shaun's daily life and that of his zombie friend Ed, chained up and playing video games.

Different interpretations are offered, though. Film reviewer Marty Maples finds it saying that this generation can't be bothered with current events, and that "clerks and the unemployed just don't feel empowered enough to be a part of the world."<sup>x</sup> Peter Dendle observes that "the over-talented, under-ambitious generation of youth" obsessed with its leisure time turn out to be the "best-equipped, temperamentally, to fend off zombies trying to feed on him and his friends."<sup>xi</sup> But Jesuit scholar Jack McLain finds a far more positive message in *Shaun*, seeing survivors that "must re-examine and re-order their world, then come together in community that allows them to not just survive, but cautiously to triumph over it."<sup>xii</sup>

I don't know. I remember thinking about the end of *Shaun*, with our anti-hero about to head out to his chained-up zombie friend Ed in the shed, so they can play video games together. Here's what I think – there's a little zombie in all of us. At *least* a little. Romero's tagline to the Dawn of the Dead movie was, "When there's no more room in hell, the dead will walk the earth." Meaning that we somehow brought this on ourselves. In modern zombie stories there always seems to be some source of contagion, a source that began with human pride or ambition. Youth worker Tripp Fuller writes, "Zombies are not a foreign problem but a human problem. The thing so haunting about zombies is that we make them out of ourselves."<sup>xiii</sup>

Zombies tell us that the contagion roots in our very being. How much of our behavior looks like that? Zombies are consumed with fulfilling one desire; they will destroy themselves and others to get what they want; they are part of a mindless and destructive herd mentality and don't know it. Don't think so? Read the email postings to AL.com sometime. The contagion is buried in the human condition. We theologians have a name for that – original sin...the same thing that makes zombies, I believe. Our metaphor is Adam and Eve in the garden (and no, original sin is not about sex or sexuality). It is about our hubris that separates us from God. In that garden metaphor, that early couple was told not to eat the fruit of that one tree or they would die. They ate it, and were expelled from the garden. Didn't God say they would die? God did, and they did, eventually, and we *do*. And we are back to life and death, where we began.

In most zombie apocalypse narratives the zombie contagion prevails, humanity dies and it is the end of all things. But not always. There is *Shaun of the Dead*, and also *World War Z*, possibly the definitive zombie novel and nearly the only one in which the humans win.<sup>xiv</sup> That makes it important, because the stories we tell are important. We *are* our stories, in the end. At least they define us. Deborah Christie is more positive than some, writing that we "tend to view zombie narratives as apocalyptic because we believe we are watching the slow breakdown or catastrophic destruction of human society...but we miss the implication that what we are witnessing in a zombie narrative is a form of violent transformative renewal."<sup>xv</sup> The philosopher Heraclitus held that "where there is no strife there is decay."

Take another apocalypse narrative. The prophet Ezekiel stands in the middle of a valley filled with bleached, dry human bones. He writes this vision down in Babylon, himself a captive of the enemy horde that has destroyed Israel, his nation. He has seen the Temple, center of his faith destroyed; he has seen evil and savagery and death; before his eyes his wife died. He saw his people limp broken into the Tigris-Euphrates delta, enslaved. It is the end of all things.

And yet, the prophet speaks at God's command, and real flesh returns to the bones, and muscle and skin, And at God's command the breath, from the four winds the *ruah*, the Spirit of God, returns life to the army of Israel. They walk from death back into life. Not zombies, but Israel newly alive. "When I open your graves, O my people, I will put my spirit within you and you will live." The God of life is *not* defeated. God resurrects their hope, and brings them home.

Parish Associate Jim Stanford reminded me of the gospel text we used this morning: Matthew's account of the death of Jesus, an event so earth-shaking that it literally shook the earth, tore the temple veil that kept the Gentiles from access to worship, and compelled faith statements from Roman soldiers. The bodies of the saints were raised. Matthew says, "after his resurrection they came out of the tombs, entered the holy city and appeared to many." Not as zombies, but as ones who refused to be zombies. No matter what it looks like, the day belongs to God, and Christ's resurrection is ours.

We are a sleepwalking culture, inured to violence, suffering compassion fatigue, accustomed to mean politics, ecological anxieties, unexplainable economic futures, and drawn-out morally ambiguous wars. In Birmingham we are too used to corruption, greed, violence, poverty and racism that we too often fail to see it. One of the reasons we formed Birmingham Faith in Action was to prophetically breathe new life into the dry bones of Birmingham, and we mean to do it.

We are about to baptize young Henry Blankenhorn, and in so doing remember our own baptisms. The imagery of baptism is passing from death to life, through resurrection waters. It seems too powerful an image for one so young, but we *are* our stories, and as a congregation we will make promises to teach Henry and help him claim the resurrection story. Baptism is the anti-virus to mindless, destructive herd-mentality, if we can remember to claim our redemption. I think that's what the saints keep wandering into the city to tell us. God refuses to accept our bitter plots, and writes a better ending. How does the apocalypse end, what is there at the end of all things? Life abundant. Life; thanks be to God.

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<sup>i</sup> Boccacio, Giovanni. Decameron, OneWorld Classics, London, 2008.

<sup>ii</sup> Freud, Sigmund. Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Norton, NY 1961, p. 46

<sup>iii</sup> Heidegger, Martin. Being and Time, SUNY Press, Albany, 1996, p. 159

<sup>iv</sup> Boon, Kevin. "The Zombie as *Other*", Better Off Dead, ed. Christie, Deborah and Lauro, Sarah Juliet, Fordham U. Press, NY, 2011, p. 57

<sup>v</sup> Clapp, Rodney. Christian Century, Chicago, Feb. 8, 2012.

<sup>vi</sup> Webster, Hannah, Communications Consultant, High Performance Technologies, personal correspondence.

<sup>vii</sup> Drezner, Daniel. Theories of International Politics and Zombies, Princeton University Press, 2011, p. 18

<sup>viii</sup> *ibid*, p. 37.

<sup>ix</sup> Silen, Mohammed. The Undead and Philosophy: Chicken Soup for the Soulless, Open Court Press, Chicago, 2006, p. 101

<sup>x</sup> cited by Pifer, Lynn, "Slacker Bites Back," *op cit* Better Off Dead

<sup>xi</sup> Dendle, Peter. "And the Dead Shall Inherit the Earth", *op cit* Better Off Dead, pp. 159-160.

<sup>xii</sup> McLain, Jack, SJ. "A Need to Feed: What Zombies Tell Us About Our Culture," America (Catholic Weekly), May 17, 2010

<sup>xiii</sup> Fuller, Tripp. "Zombies Are Among Us", Impressions, Nazarene Pub. House, Kansas City, May/June 2012, p. 24

<sup>xiv</sup> Brooks, Max. World War Z, Three Rivers Press, NY, 2006.

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<sup>xv</sup> Christie, Deborah, Better Off Dead, Fordham University Press, NY, 2011, pp. 61-62