Come slowly, Lord Jesus

I want the kingdom of God to be civilized. If possible I'd like to be able to keep sleeping in my own bed.

by Katherine Willis Pershey in the May 13, 2015 issue

A new heaven and new earth, 17th-century print by Matthias Scheits.

As a general rule, I do not read dystopian fiction. Sometimes, however, my distaste for the genre is superseded by my pathological need to be a good book club

member. I am loathe to skip a meeting, and I don't like to attend without having read the book. This is how I came to read *Station Eleven*, the highly acclaimed 2014 National Book Award finalist by Emily St. John Mandel: under the duress of peer pressure. It's a well-executed and engrossing book that I cannot stop wishing I hadn't read.

I spent a recent Saturday with my nose in the book, if one can still use that phrase for reading a book on the Kindle app for iPad. I slept terribly that night, as I often do when my mind is enmeshed in something unpleasant. I dreamed myself into the disturbing near-future that Mandel imagines: a civilization extinguished by a massive influenza pandemic. Nearly everyone gone, and nearly everything gone, too.

In a haunting chapter titled "An Incomplete List," Mandel catalogs the casualties of the flu apocalypse:

> No more diving into pools of chlorinated water lit green from below. No more ball games played out under floodlights. No more porch lights with moths fluttering on summer nights. No more trains running under the surface of cities on the dazzling power of the electric third rail. No more cities.

Surely the miserable deaths of so many people—the meticulously crafted characters as well as the anonymous masses—should have been what made me saddest. But I didn't weep for the human loss in *Station Eleven*. Fictional characters die fictional deaths, and this rarely evokes more than fictional grief. It was the vision of a life without swimming pools and porch lights that undid me. It filled me with a potent nostalgia for a world that has not ended—not yet.

I am perhaps a bit more eschatologically minded than some mainline pastors. I'm stubborn about eschatology; I don't want to leave it all to the premillennial dispensationalists. I want a robust vision of the telos of the story, and the way I read scripture leads me to believe that we are wise to entrust ourselves to God's future, that it is faithful to hope that in the fullness of time there will be reconciliation and restoration. I preach about the new heaven and the new earth. My favorite part of the communion liturgy is the part where we intone, "Christ will come again"—because I actually believe that he will and that everything will be different when he does.

There are plenty of Christians who wish the book of Revelation hadn't been included in the canon. But the story of our faith would be anemic without the vision of a God

who dwells with God's people, wiping our tears away. We need an Alpha and an Omega.

Station Eleven isn't the only apocalyptic narrative that has given me nightmares lately. Between services on Ash Wednesday, I read Graeme Wood's "What ISIS Really Wants." The *Atlantic* article has generated a great deal of controversy for arguing that the terrorist caliphate is, in fact, deeply Islamic—despite many Muslims' insistence that ISIS is rife with gross distortions of the faith. The group's understanding of Islam is profoundly disturbing—as it must be to justify the horrific violence perpetuated by its adherents.

A vicious prophet inhabits the world of *Station Eleven*, and Mandel's description applies as well to violent fanatics of any religious persuasion:

> If you are the light, if your enemies are darkness, then there's nothing that you cannot justify. There's nothing you can't survive, because there's nothing that you will not do.

ISIS is wholly uncivilized. Its members expect an apocalypse, sooner rather than later, and their actions are intended to expedite the end of the world. I can't bear to consider the "incomplete list" of things that presumably wouldn't endure in the dystopian utopia imagined by radicals such as Musa Cerantonio, the Australian ISIS supporter featured in Wood's article.

Station Eleven and "What ISIS Really Wants" are, to be clear, as disparate as fire and ice. Yet each offers a sufficiently terrifying conclusion to the world as we know it. Reading them reminded me how much I don't actually want things to be different. This is probably evidence of my privilege; it is usually the oppressed who yearn most ardently for apocalyptic vindication. Sure, there are changes I would love to see: an end to war and illness and hunger (and while we're at it: horror movies, *Grand Theft Auto* video games, and the month of January). But I want the kingdom of God to be civilized, and if possible I'd like to be able to keep sleeping in my own bed.

When I consider eschatology in the Bible, it's not the fiery lakes of the book of Revelation that unnerve me most. I'm well versed enough in apocalyptic literature to know that these images aren't meant to be interpreted literally. What truly rattles me is Jesus' response to the Sadducees' query about marriage in the resurrection, a conversation that takes place in all three synoptic Gospels. The Sadducees propose a moderately ridiculous scenario: the same woman outliving seven ill-fated

husbands. “In the resurrection,” they ponder, “whose wife will she be?”

The question is meant to stump Jesus. His answer is startling: he essentially tells them they’re asking the wrong question. “For when they rise from the dead,” Jesus says in Mark’s version, “they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven.”

Is this good news? The promised paradise is presumably better than anything I know in this world. (There are jokes to be made here; perhaps the presence of certain husbands and certain wives could turn eternal life into a perfect hell.) Still, I find myself clinging to this life, full as it is of sorrows and joys. I find myself clinging to the smell of chlorine from my morning swim, to my favorite pop songs, to the sadnesses I have carried so long I don’t know where they end and I begin. I find myself clinging to my husband. I long for God to make things right, but I’m in no rush. *Come, Lord Jesus*—but not yet. Not yet.