

What Christian hope looks like during a pandemic

Living into the desired new creation is our work—and God’s promise.

by [Jesse Zink](#) in the [July 29, 2020](#) issue



(Image © Elvira Draat / iStock / Getty)

There was a profusion of rainbows in Montreal this spring. During the first weeks of social distancing and stay-at-home orders, an array of multicolored artwork soon covered the apartment windows in my neighborhood. Many were accompanied by the same slogan: “Ça va bien aller,” roughly, “It’s going to be fine.”

Perhaps it is only principals of theological colleges who think this way, but the slogan reminded me of Julian of Norwich, the 14th-century English mystic. Julian knew pandemic: as a child, she lived through the Black Death, which killed about a third of

the people in her city. At age 30, sick and near death, she had a series of mystical visions (“shewings”) of Christ. She survived and went on to write *Revelations of Divine Love*, an account of these visions.

In chapter 27 of *Revelations*, Julian finds herself perplexed by the nature of sin in the world. She asks, “If sin had not been, we should all have been clean and like to our Lord, as He made us.” She continues: “I wondered why by the great foreseeing wisdom of God the beginning of sin was not letted: for then, methought, all should have been well.”

In her vision, she hears Christ say, “It behoved that there should be sin.” Nonetheless, he continues, turning her subjunctive statement into an indicative, “all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.” Julian concludes the chapter with an eschatological vision: “And in these words I saw a marvellous high mystery hid in God, which mystery He shall openly make known to us in Heaven.” Julian may not fully understand the nature of sin now, but she asserts with confidence that God will act to bring full understanding. In light of that, she too can affirm that all will be well.

In recent generations, eschatology has been relatively muted in mainline Protestant churches. The primary way that many Protestants have spoken eschatologically has been through the language of the kingdom of God. Much of this can be traced to theological debates in the 1950s about the language of *missio Dei*, the mission of God. In this period, the focus of mission shifted from the church to the kingdom, which God was believed to be revealing in our midst. The role for Christians was to find out where God was working in the world and to join in. More recently the emphasis is often on what human action in the world can do to bring about the kingdom of God.

The pandemic is eschatological time. I am called to live now in a way that will later succeed.

This is a relatively narrow understanding of Christian eschatology. It doesn’t fully account for the brokenness and fallenness of Christians, and it fails to see a role for God’s action to fulfill all things in the future.

It is this latter eschatological vision that has motivated Christians across centuries. The community reading the prophet Isaiah heard a clear promise of restoration and renewal: “I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things

shall not be remembered or come to mind . . . for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight” (Isa. 65:17–18). Readers of the book of Revelation suffering under an oppressive empire could draw hope and confidence from the belief that God would act and that one day they too could say, “Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great!” (Rev. 18:2). The belief in God’s action in the world was the ground of their hope for the future. It also provided an orientation for their living: directed toward the future, believing in God’s fulfilling action, and seeking to live now like they believed the future would one day be.

Seen in this way, eschatological living is, as Sam Wells puts it, about persisting in a cause that may seem hopeless now but will ultimately succeed, rather than participating in a cause that seems successful now but which will ultimately fail. Another way of affirming this eschatological conviction is, “All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.” Or, in contemporary Montreal parlance, “Ça va bien aller.”

The change of lifestyle forced on many of us by the COVID-19 pandemic has been unusual and unsettling. I am not used to spending so much time at home, to educating and entertaining my children throughout the day, to communicating with so many people through a computer screen. Part of the difference of this time, I have begun to realize, is that the pandemic is eschatological time. As a citizen, I am called to live now in a way—socially distant—that will one day succeed, even if it is painful and difficult now. To do so, I need to give up many common habits and patterns of life and relationship—no matter how appealing they may be—because I know they will not curtail the spread of this virus and reduce its devastation.

The fundamental eschatological virtue is hope, the belief expressed in confident action that God will act to transform our world. But hope is not easy or simple, certainly not when your family is crawling up the walls of your home. “Ça va bien aller” sounds like pious advice given by those without children at home (notwithstanding that many of these rainbows show clear signs of being children’s handiwork). But this is paradoxically the time when Christians can be most hopeful and pray, “All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.”

Eschatological living not only gives Christians hope for the future, it also allows us to cast a critical eye on the way we live now. If we know how God will act to fulfill all things, we are called to live now like we believe the future will one day be. It is a

future of new creation, right relationship, and the overthrow of oppressive regimes.

In both Canada and the United States, this pandemic has revealed the deep imperfections of our social structures. We have seen who is “essential”—and that the pay and rewards for many of these essential workers are far below the value of their role in society. Long-term care providers, long-distance truck drivers, grocery store stockers: we have realized their essential nature more clearly than ever before. We have begun to recognize that decisions about work conditions—sick pay, overtime—need to be decided as a society and not outsourced to gig economy employers. We’ve spent trillions of dollars in the blink of an eye to respond to immediate economic catastrophe—even as we continue to show deep reluctance to spend similar amounts to combat the gathering impacts of climate change and the economic damage it will wreak.

Thinking eschatologically brings these issues to the fore. It allows Christians to think clearly and act boldly in rebuilding our devastated communities.

Julian heard Christ say, “It behoved that there should be sin.” It is a bold statement to make: that through the pain and suffering caused by sin in the world, we are able to see God’s action at work leading to all manner of things being well. In the midst of this pandemic, I cannot yet affirm that “it behoved that there be COVID-19.” There is simply too much struggle and suffering now to say that.

But I can recognize this time as eschatological. I can live in hope and confidence. I can look in fresh and critical ways at the way my community is structured. I can use the lessons learned in this time to help rebuild a new community that moves us toward that eschatological vision in our scriptures as we await God’s final fulfillment of all things. In all of this I can affirm: All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well. Ça va bien aller.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Shall all be well?”