The grace of apocalyptic imagination

As the depth of the climate crisis is revealed, our despair grows. But God hovers at the edge of doom.

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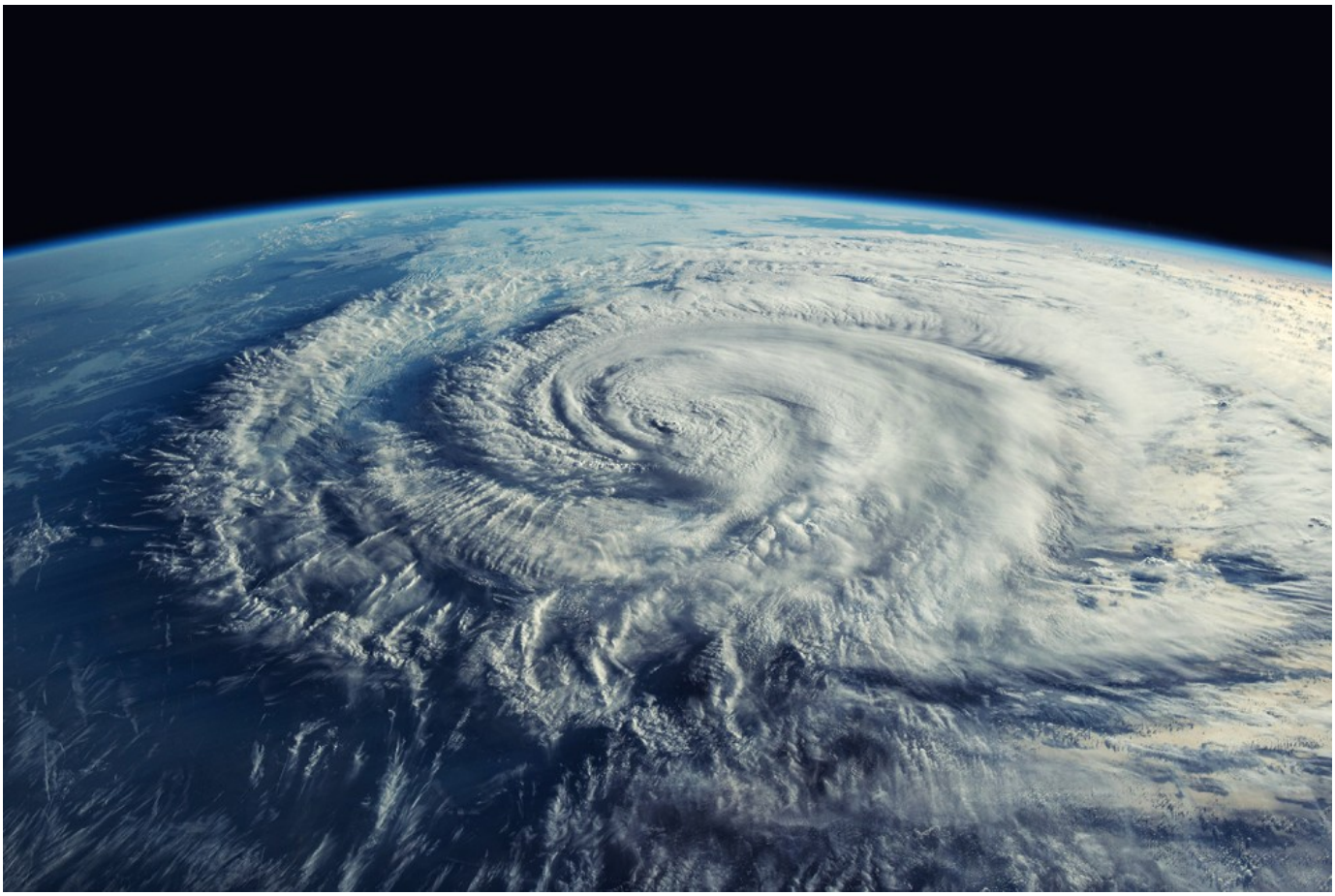

(Image: NASA / Evgeniy Trifonov / iStock / Getty)

As Hurricane Milton bore down on Florida's Gulf Coast, North Carolina state climatologist Kathie Dello characterized the aftermath of Hurricane Helene as "apocalyptic destruction." Helene dumped 31 inches of rain on a region of North Carolina considered relatively safe from extreme weather disasters. Such storms are increasingly unpredictable, affecting even inland areas where people don't expect

them.

Climate apocalypse seems to be our new shared reality. A 2021 survey found that 59 percent of teens and young adults were very worried about climate change, while 75 percent described the future as frightening. *Apocalypse* means revelation, and as the depth of the climate crisis is revealed, our despair grows.

But as Jack Holloway writes, “pessimism is part of the power of apocalyptic imagination.” Holloway traces the use of apocalyptic imagery in heavy metal music, from Black Sabbath’s “War Pigs” to Napalm Death’s “On the Brink of Extinction.” Knowing that the present world is doomed can be a gift, says Holloway, when it fuels the desire to bring about something better: “When things are cataclysmic and horrifying . . . we need daring, world-changing consciousness.”

This sort of apocalyptic imagination comes in many forms. At the University of California, a course called Climate Resilience aims to help students move from despair to action. Assignments include working in a community garden, writing a love letter to the earth, and practicing mindfulness meditation. One exercise involves staring into a partner’s eyes and going through a series of guided thoughts: “This person was once a small child, just like me. This person has had happy times, just like me. This person has been hurt, just like me.” These are small-scale practices, but they have the potential to cultivate world-changing consciousness.

Perhaps surviving an apocalypse begins with small, local action. In the heart of North Carolina’s most flooded region, a Presbyterian conference center responded to Helene’s destruction with apocalyptic imagination. Despite sustaining significant damage of its own, Montreat offered space for local rescue organizations to set up command centers to help others. One group teamed up with a local ranch to send out mules to deliver food, medicine, water, and diapers to people stranded in rural areas.

It’s a good time of year to think about local solidarity and the stirring up of world-changing consciousness. In the incarnation, God became a small child, one who had happy times like us, who hurt like us, and—as Ragan Sutterfield writes—whose body contained other living beings like ours do. The newborn Jesus hosted microbial life from the muddy first-century roads, the animals he was born among, and the breath of his exhausted parents. “God not only took on human flesh,” writes Sutterfield, “but became entangled with the creation itself.”

In a world that’s so deeply entangled with God while also hovering at the edge of doom, the grace of apocalyptic imagination can arise in unexpected ways: a metal band railing against injustice and destruction, mules carrying insulin to a patient isolated by floodwaters, a baby ingesting the bacterial life of a nearby donkey, one person staring into another’s eyes and saying, “You need help just like me.” With every storm, there will be new ways to nurture our holy entanglement with all of creation.