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3-2022

## Tears & Ashes: Three Ways of Looking at the Recent Wildfires in the West

Vincent J. Miller

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# Tears & Ashes

**Vincent Miller**

*Three ways of looking at the recent wildfires in the West*



From December 2020 to January 2022, Douglas fir seedlings grow in the Blue River Conservation Easement, Oregon, after the Holiday Farm Fire.

**A**s life in the Anthropocene unfolds ever more rapidly, what were once called “biblical” disasters—fires, floods, locusts, and whirlwinds—have become a daily reality. We watch anxiously as catastrophes occur, at least as much as our screens allow, but still go about our business: reading the next story in our newsfeed or wading into half-flooded subways to avoid being late for work. The problem we face is more difficult than mere inattentiveness: we need to cultivate a way of seeing adequate to the changed world being revealed in these catastrophes.

What we watch on a screen unfolds in a place. Take the Holiday Farm Fire, one of the 2020 Labor Day fires in Oregon. Hot dry winds from the east blew hard over forests dried to tinder by a summer of record low rains. Hurricane force winds sparked electrical lines and whipped small smoldering fires into infernos. The fires roared over ridges and down the McKenzie River valley faster than alerts could be issued, shocking even those long accustomed to living with red-flag fire warnings. Emergency alerts skipped immediately from Level 1 (“Be ready”) to Level 3 (“Go!”). Many barely escaped with their lives. Some did not.

The Labor Day fires burned more than a tenth of the Oregon Cascades, incinerated entire towns, destroyed thousands of homes, killed eleven people and untold animals. Outside the fire zone, the rest of us watched the now-familiar genre of shaky phone videos of escape drives through infernos and listened to coronavirus-masked reporters interviewing traumatized survivors. Thousands of miles away, we marveled, conflicted or ignorant, at the beauty of sunsets rendered magnificent by the remains of Western forests scattered in the stratosphere.

Surveying the ashes, we can ask: What were these wildfires? Were they the latest turn of an ancient cycle of fire and regeneration in which these forests have evolved to thrive? Or did the blood-red skies over cities from San Francisco to Seattle portend something new, something as dystopian as the films they so eerily evoked? The uncertainty here is deeper than the statistics of climate science. It cuts to the heart of our ability to see and respond to the moment in which we are living. Even those deeply attuned to the unfolding climate crises face the question: How to attend to the full truth of these fires?

Our typical ways of seeing, formed by the ephemerality and superficiality of the media flow, do not prepare us for this. But we can hone our gaze by considering alternatives to



All photos by David Paul Bayles. These images are part of a long-term collaboration with scientist Frederick J. Swanson to document post-fire recovery and resilience.



**It requires serious work of imagination to think in forest time. Human lives are not easily attuned to these timescales.**

the shallow seeing of everyday life: the deep time of forest cycles and the ancient biblical tradition of the apocalyptic. Doing so might offer an unexpected way to see through the smoke—and better meet the demands of this new and disorienting moment.

### **I. Forest Time**

Even after such a fierce wildfire, most trees remain standing, their bark blackened and peeling, branches twisted and stripped of life. Sap pours down many trunks—a last-ditch effort to heal wounds beyond repair. Beneath the charred remains of trees, everything is reduced to the inorganic end of the palette: the charcoal black of burnt stumps and fallen branches, the ocher of clay soils, some sintered into ceramic by the kiln-hot blast of the wildfire. The colors of life—the greens of leaves and browns of humus centuries deep—are burnt away to shades of gray. What remains of the soil sinks underneath each step, as newly created voids collapse—microscopic crematoria that once pulsed with the underground forest life of roots, fungi, and countless invertebrates. Terrain that used to be dense with hummocks of vegetation, decaying logs, and ancient stumps is emptied. Trenches stretch where fallen logs lay. Tunnels twist into the ground where massive roots anchored trees.

The burned landscape exceeds easy comprehension. Loss is truly absence. The once-green horizon is stripped; naked rock ridges show through the standing dead remains of the forest. The once hushed press of understory is opened to the sounds of wind. Sight itself takes place in the altered light beneath the twisted remains of the incinerated canopy. What is most literally no longer present might be the most significant: the missing biomass of trees, plants, and soil that has become countless megatons of atmospheric carbon dioxide.

Within months, green returns to the seeming wasteland. Shoots spout from charred trunks and blackened sword fern crowns. By spring, fire moss—its spores always waiting unseen on the wind—blankets the ground to a startling depth. Understory plants such as Oregon grape and fireweed follow by summer. And, miraculous to see, tiny Douglas fir seedlings sprout, often in the collapsing tunnels that held the roots of the previous generation.

From the perspective of forest time, wildfires are nothing new. Fire plays an essential role in the west-slope Cascades by opening the canopy so that shade-intolerant species can find the sun they need to grow. If you've stood in an old-growth stand of

Douglas fir, chances are good that it dates from a previous catastrophic fire. Indeed, the groves that form our collective imagination of ancient forests were mostly born in the aftermath of a period of intense fire activity five hundred years ago. No fire, no Douglas fir forests.

Like a wave surging back and forth across the landscape for millennia, the forest has, time and again, regrown after the devastation of fire and windthrow. Taking a still longer perspective, back into evolutionary and deep geological time, the forest itself, ever adapting, surfs the roiling volcanic ranges thrown up by the subduction fault at the foot of the continent's edge.

There is, perhaps, a kind of hope to be found in these cycles. Devastation and ashes are part of a larger cycle of regrowth and flourishing. This is akin to the Wisdom traditions in the Hebrew Scriptures that sought to learn from the cycles of nature: "For everything, there is a season."

It requires serious work of imagination, however, to think in forest time. Recolonization by Douglas firs takes three decades, the full development of the forest community a century, maturity twice that, and "old growth" longer still. In its more critical moments, the Wisdom tradition stresses the evanescence of human life. We are but *hebel*—often translated as "vanity," the word is literally "puff of air." Those who live through a fire will never see the forest return to its adolescence, let alone maturity. For them, what they knew is irrevocably gone. Human lives are not easily attuned to these timescales.

### **II. Everyday Life**

The difficulty of thinking in forest time, however, is not simply due to the limits of human perception. Our sense of time is cultural. Sincere attempts to think like a forest are hemmed in by the news cycle and bills that will soon come due. Henri Lefebvre, the heterodox Marxist philosopher, spoke of *le quotidien* ("everyday life"). He used this term to describe the banality of life in post-war capitalism: a life of working and consuming inspired by the mass media and glossy advertising images. He contrasted this shallow seeing and empty time with the agricultural seasons and religious festivals of the village life it had replaced.

In *le quotidien*, our lives float free from the cycles of nature—both their joys and constraints. Berries are always in season at the supermarket. Drought might parch the hills around us, but water flows unabated from our taps—unless, of course, we cannot pay the bill. Even those who live on the forest-civilization boundary



A close-up of a tree charred by the Holiday Farm Fire, which burned 173,000 acres of land (“Bark #25,” Blue River, Oregon, 2021)

surrounded by trees seldom truly dwell in the forest. Human loss is evident throughout the firescape: burnt-over foundations lie ringed with a midsummer frost of scattered insulation. But human recovery follows different patterns and timescales than the forest.

The abiding power of everyday life is evident even in the experiences of fire survivors. During interviews, I’d hoped to explore ecological grief, but people’s attention was fixed on more immediate demands. After the crisis of the escape comes the need for a laptop and wifi or transportation to work, visits to relief centers and calls to FEMA or insurance companies to cover emergency housing. People who have lived through a life- and landscape-altering catastrophe are forced to spend time arguing with a cable company’s demand for the return of an incinerated modem in order to close an account. The collective processing of shared trauma is shattered into individual efforts to return to “normal.”

For all its seeming power to disrupt, the conflagration does little to challenge the hegemony of everyday life. Indeed, even the most overwhelming disaster sorts people ever more severely according to its logic. Salvadoran theologian Jon Sobrino has argued that there are few truly *natural* disasters. Social inequalities determine outcomes from the start. Those wealthy enough to afford insurance find temporary housing and begin the long and difficult process of rebuilding. Those without it find their marginalization increased. With their ancestral homes or the only rental they could afford destroyed, and lacking the capital to rebuild, they are stuck in emergency housing far from their communities, with few options to return to their former lives.

The dominance of economic factors is painfully apparent in community visioning sessions which, of necessity, become conversations about what owners with insurance can afford to do.



That a tenth of the Cascades forest could burn in a little more than a week shows how rapidly these ancient cycles of regrowth could collapse. ("Charred Stump and Wire," Finn Rock Reach, Oregon, 2021)

Those most impoverished by the disaster cannot even participate in these meetings, which require the means to remain in the area or to travel back for them. In the world we have made, towns and communities aren't rebuilt, individual homes and businesses are.

The disciplining power of everyday life is also evident in the experiences of those outside the fire's direct path. Smoke blankets entire regions. Noon-dark skies and unbreathable air could stand as a dire, visceral sign of ecological destruction, but they register largely as disruptors of our routines: hindering commutes, errands, and exercise. Even our sincere attempts to witness such events rarely escape the logic of everyday life. The flow of broadcast and social media constrains our gaze. We watch whatever video footage is available, and struggle to make sense of the chaos. News reporters interview survivors and broadcast official updates on the fire. But there is little opportunity

for a contemplative gaze, for deep knowing. Victims' stories come and go. Images provide little context. Even the most overwhelming disaster must yield to the next story in the news cycle. *Le quotidien* marches on.

Of course, modern life influences such disasters on a much deeper level than perception. Our getting and spending takes place within a global system of extraction, descended from colonialism, that is part of both the conditions of wildfires and their recovery. Climate change, born of two centuries of emissions from our industrial civilization, brings record heat and shifts in rain patterns, raising the likelihood of catastrophic fires. So do commercial tree plantations, which differ in structure from natural forests. The former are composed of young trees with thin bark and a single crown level on dry ground that's been stripped of the litter and decomposing logs that hold moisture. Fires spread more rapidly and catastrophically here than in the



more complex, mixed natural forests we've nearly logged out of existence. In those few remaining groves, ancient trees often survived with little more than fire-scorching on their thick bark.

An equally profound impact appears in the cycle of restoration, where the boot of the Anthropocene grinds the neck of the forest's ancient processes. Forest ecosystems have evolved to reseed burn zones from surviving remnants and the surrounding forest. Tree and understory species are easily counted and catalogued, but the forest is also composed of tens of thousands of species of mosses, fungi, algae, bacteria, worms, and arthropods. Monoculture tree plantations have been stripped of most of these and thus cannot reseed burnt-over areas as in the past. Record temperatures and droughts stress even mature plants; they are also changing the parameters in which seedlings attempt to grow. Scorched plantations are replanted with commercial seed stock selected a half-century ago to grow quickly in a climate that no longer exists. The limited biodiversity of these plantations' monocultures also deprives the forest of the full range of species from which new ecological communities might emerge for a changed climate. That a tenth of the Cascades forest could burn in a little more than a week shows how rapidly these ancient cycles could collapse.

Finding hope in everyday life is difficult. It is so easily reduced to wishing for a return to "normal." This is precisely the sort of hope that Derrick Jensen has trenchantly criticized: hope that "keeps us chained to the system, the conglomerate of people and ideas and ideals that is causing the destruction of the Earth." But the truth of that admonition must be held in tension with the unequal impact of these disasters. In addition to deeply entrenched patterns of environmental injustice, the violence of the Anthropocene is exposing to disaster new populations who, understandably, want their lives back. The unevenness of ecological collapse will compound the longstanding ecological injustices we already find so easy to ignore.

### III. Apocalyptic

How might we break the spell of the everyday in order to honor these disasters with the attention they deserve? Another biblical tradition—the apocalyptic—offers a very different way of seeing. The word "apocalyptic" comes easily to mind when fire roars on the horizon, ashes fall from the sky, and the sun is cloaked in blood, but it offers a much richer perspective than the movie-theater explosions to which it is often reduced. The word means "revelation" or, perhaps more viscerally, a tearing

away of the veil that obscures the truth. Alongside the complex and often lurid imagery in these texts is often a visionary command to see and witness: "Write in a book what you see and send it...." We contemporary witnesses can learn from the apocalyptic a sense of time and a way of seeing attuned to catastrophe, disruption, and discontinuity.

From an environmental perspective, the apocalyptic might seem to be the least helpful way imaginable to approach our ecological crisis. Aren't Christian visions of divine salvation emerging out of fiery destruction precisely the problem? The Book of Revelation certainly portrays humans living on in eternity in a new creation while the old is consigned to oblivion. Chelsea Steinauer-Scudder finds in Jewish and Christian apocalyptic perspectives a shared temporal imagination "in which an exalted and uncomplicated beginning always follows an ending." Trapped in such a view, we can end up accepting extinction and destruction, treating them as necessary turning points in an inevitable cycle of redemption. Simpler still, apocalyptic visions can seem the ultimate deus-ex-machina cheapening of hope that Jensen described: the belief that the system will "inexplicably change" through the salvific intervention of technology, the Great Mother, or Jesus Christ.

Even without such theoretical critiques, however, the apocalyptic is easily dismissed as the province of fundamentalists calculating the day of Armageddon, undeterred by the countless failures of such prophecies to come true. Many modern believers find it to be an embarrassment.

The theologian Johannes Metz was attracted to the apocalyptic precisely because it seemed such an embarrassment to modern sensibilities. He found in the apocalyptic not an anesthetizing reassurance of salvation, but a dangerous challenge to the status quo. Suspicious of the power of dominant stories to gloss over reality, the apocalyptic is attuned to the discontinuities that can disrupt them. Metz drew inspiration from Walter Benjamin's Jewish vision of "messianic time," in which every moment "becomes a gate through which the Messiah enters into history." The apocalyptic in this sense can cultivate attentiveness to those ignored and excluded from triumphalist narratives of progress. Metz describes this aspect of the apocalyptic as "dangerous memory" that "remembers not only the successful, but the destroyed, not only what has been actualized, but what has been lost."

Metz saw in the apocalyptic not a simple fascination with catastrophe, but rather an awareness

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**Our moment gives birth to a new figure: the “bystander-for-now,” we who watch from near and far, not yet driven from our homes by fire or flood.**

of the catastrophic nature of time itself. An apocalyptic sense of time alerts us to the privileged density of catastrophic moments and can prompt us to attend more carefully to their natural and human dimensions. What knowledge might we allow to enter if we treated the charcoal remains of a burned tree or a survivor’s trauma as a gateway for truth that demands our attention?

The apocalyptic, then, teaches a way of seeing: sustained attention to these moments that seeks to understand their deep meaning. In this way, true apocalyptic seeing is the opposite of the filmic portrayals of disaster with which it is often associated. It cultivates a contemplative gaze that lingers to read the signs within the spectacle. It attends to the roar of fire, but abides with the ashes and the tears of those who dwell in them. The apocalyptic calls forth what Metz called a “mysticism of open eyes.”

An apocalyptic suspicion of established narratives illuminates our world of shifting climate baselines. As we have seen, massive fires are natural events with a long history. What is different in this moment? How did this fire diverge from past cycles of disturbance? These fires followed record-setting periods of heat and drought in the region. These were not isolated extremes. Precipitation levels have been dropping and summertime atmospheric aridity has been steadily increasing for decades. The fuel for these fires was prepared by the global warming our actions have produced. Weather records broken in that summer of catastrophe were again shattered in the next. How might the changed climate impact recovery? That forest is gone, a different one will replace it. In that disjuncture lies our future.

The effects of the Anthropocene are spread across the globe, dispersed in what Timothy Morton calls a “hyperobject” resistant to human perception. Nevertheless, its violence is felt viscerally by plants withering as deserts spread, starving polar bears separated from their prey by open water, and by the few remaining vaquita tangled in fishing nets thrashing for air as I write. In these fires and floods, the Anthropocene erupts into human experience. We must attend to all the dimensions of our response. In his encyclical letter on the environment, *Laudato si’*, Pope Francis spoke of this emotional dimension of knowledge as becoming “painfully aware” and daring “to turn what is happening to the world into our own personal suffering and thus to discover what each of us can do about it.” Our fears and anxieties are more than a suspension of reason. We should consider them reason’s expansion *in extremis*.



For this reason, the trauma of survivors demands our attention. We certainly have a duty to offer them comfort and healing, but more than that, we need to respect their witness as a source of insight and knowledge. As a social species we should view trauma as more than a source of potential individual psychopathology—it has a social function as well. The traumatized bear the wounds of a direct encounter with the destructive forces we have unleashed. Those who have glimpsed the end of the world have much to teach.

What value might the experience of those of us with only peripheral connection to these disasters have, those of us torn between genuine concern and the demands of everyday life? Writing at the height of the Cold War, Thomas Merton noted that





So many of us live on the cusp of these disasters: breathing the smoke of fires that do not reach us. ("Stump Ghost #15," Blue River, Oregon, 2021)

in this fallen world, all bystanders are guilty. Our moment gives birth to a new figure: the “bystander-for-now”: we who watch from near and far, not *yet* driven from our homes by fire or flood, or forced to flee our land because of drought, famine, or socioeconomic collapse. So many of us live on the cusp of these disasters: breathing the smoke of fires that do not reach us, watching clouds pass by that will visit tornadoes and floods upon others. The mixture of anxiety and *schadenfreude* we feel gazing upon others’ loss is itself revelatory. In these feelings we know what is happening even if the cycles of daily life prevent us from living out this realization.

What might hope mean in the context of apocalyptic seeing? Thomas Aquinas saw the virtue of hope as a precarious balance between presumption and despair. He defined it as a desire for a future good that is possible but difficult to attain. Hope presumes the ability not only to foresee the desired outcome,

but also to understand the obstacles to attaining it. Hope thus requires open eyes, a hard seeing of the truth of circumstance.

To find the truth of our moment beyond the shallow seeing of everyday life, we must cultivate awareness of what is too often pushed to the edges of our vision. Pause. Let the flow of chatter and certainties be interrupted. Let your gaze linger on tears and ashes. Contemplate what is so often ignored. At the end of the world, hope is easily seduced by denial. Only the stricken gaze can find its path in this darkness. 🕯️

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VINCENT MILLER is the Gudorf Chair in Catholic Theology and Culture at the University of Dayton, where he is a Sustainability Scholar at the Hanley Sustainability Institute. He is editor of *The Theological and Ecological Vision of Laudato Si’: Everything is Connected* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017). He is writing a theological response to neoliberalism and the Anthropocene entitled *Homo Curans*.