How to Characterize Our Times
*The Wired Word for the Week of June 14, 2020*

**In the News**

TWW's senior editor, Stan Purdum, recently noticed that since the coronavirus became a "thing" on our planet, writers in all kinds of media have been using a lot of adjectives to characterize our times. According to these writers, our times are unprecedented, anxious, unsettled, inconvenient, bizarre, strange, uncertain, difficult, seismic, challenging, extraordinary, unmoored, shifting, dizzying, unstable or turbulent -- and that doesn't exhaust the list.

Back in February -- even before attempts to limit the spread Covid-19 had severely impacted our way of life, and even before a white Minneapolis cop kneeling on a black man's neck until he died launched protests (and for some, including some outside provocateurs, was used as an excuse to riot and loot) around the world that are shaking up the way policing is done and confronting our culture with the need for systemic changes in how we live together as a multi-race society -- *The Christian Science Monitor* launched a series of articles under the moniker, "Navigating Uncertainty."

Among the uncertainties the *Monitor* cited is "the shift of the center of gravity eastward toward a rising, authoritarian China," and away from the United States, and the collapse of old economic models and old technologies. "The shine has come off globalization and its benefits since the world economic crash of a decade ago," said the *Monitor* article, penned by its London correspondent Ned Temko. "Long-standing trade agreements have been giving way to tariff wars."

The article also noted the need to find ways to "safeguard the core values and achievements of the post-World War II order: democracy and human rights, the freer movement of people, educational improvements, and economic growth," since there are significant forces afoot against all those achievements, values, rights and trends.

Among the ingredients that are adding to the turmoil of the times, said Temko, are the politics of anger and intolerance, conspiracy theories amplified by the power and reach of the Internet, and strongman leaders around the world "mixing populism with strident, even xenophobic, nationalism."

We might also add an increase in tribalism, identity politics and hyper-moralizing (seeing one's own views as "good," meaning that anyone who differs is "evil"), and other such factors that magnify differences into divisions.

What's more, many people have lost their trust in established national and international institutions to look out for them, and working hard and playing by the rules seems to some to no longer be a pathway to making it, Temko said.
Looking back, the *Monitor* observed that following World War II, a fairly stable world order emerged, and that during the Cold War era (1945-1991), there was at least a political stability, where the United States, in alliance with the countries of Western Europe, stood against the rival superpower, the totalitarian Soviet Union, which dominated Eastern Europe. With the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, "a brief flame of hope flared that the world was on the brink of a new, shared international commitment to the model of free-market democracies," Temko said.

At that point, noted Temko, political scientist Francis Fukuyama went so far as to proclaim "the end of history," arguing that with the ascendency of Western capitalist liberal democracy humanity had reached "not just ... the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: That is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government," as Fukuyama explained it.

But as the passing of time has shown us, Fukuyama spoke too soon. "Now," said Temko, "if there is a single defining power rivalry in the world, it pits the U.S. against an increasingly well-resourced and ambitious China," a contest that "is becoming increasingly bipolar because Washington has called into question its commitment to alliances not only in Europe but in Asia as well."

Fukuyama's basic thesis was that since the time of the French Revolution, liberal democracy has repeatedly proven to be a fundamentally better system (ethically, politically, economically) than any of the alternatives. While he wasn't saying that events will stop occurring in the future, he was saying that all that will happen in the future -- even if "temporary" centuries-long setbacks occur -- is that liberal democracy will become more and more prevalent in the long term.

But these days, unprecedented, anxious, unsettled, inconvenient, bizarre, strange, uncertain, difficult, seismic, challenging, extraordinary, unmoored, shifting, dizzying, unstable and turbulent as they may be, we have to wonder if history has restarted.

More on this story can be found at these links:


Why History Didn't End, *Theos*

The Best Words to Use During Unprecedented Times, *Dictionary.com*


**Applying the News Story**

Yes, in the words of Bob Dylan, the times they are a-changin'. But it also strikes us here at *The Wired Word* that the work of the biblical prophets came about in response to uncertain and anxious times, as did much of the rest of the Bible. In fact, we might consider the Bible as a manual for hard times.
We also have a thought in response to Fukuyama's end-of-history theory, and that is that the Bible, too, has something to say about the end of history. Theologians refer to it as eschatology, lay people more often as "the end of time" and the Bible as the return of Jesus and a New Jerusalem (Revelation 21). But whatever the terminology, the outcome is the same: Trouble, suffering, pain and death are no more, and God, and those who stand with him, go on into eternity.

**The Big Questions**

1. Does it seem to you as if the world as we know it has "shifted" under your feet in recent months? Why or why not?

2. If you had to pick just one adjective from this list -- unprecedented, anxious, unsettled, inconvenient, bizarre, strange, uncertain, difficult, seismic, challenging, extraordinary, unmoored, shifting, dizzying, unstable, turbulent -- to characterize our current times, which one would it be, and why? If you were to choose an adjective not on this list, what would it be, and why?

3. What could make our present times also able to be characterized as momentous, opportune or engaging?

4. What help that you normally receive from face-to-face gathered worship with others do you find difficult to receive from online or other virtual worship gatherings? How does that absence affect your outlook on these times right now? What do you like best about online worship that you can't do in person? Pressing pause? Snacks? Staying in pajamas? Talking back?"

5. In what ways, if at all, does your faith in Christ help you navigate uncertainty?

**Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope**

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

**Jeremiah 29:11**

_For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope._ (For context, read 29:4-14.)

This is from a letter the prophet Jeremiah sent to the people of Judah who had been forced into exile in Babylon, in which Jeremiah tells his fellow Judahites that according to the word he had from the Lord, they should resign themselves to a decades-long captivity. What's more, while they should continue to worship the Lord God, they should also adapt to life there in Babylon, and even seek the welfare of the city to which they'd been exiled (v. 7).

Nonetheless, said Jeremiah in the verse above, God had plans for their welfare and not for their harm, and thus, they could look to the future with hope. But their release from exile was going to be a long time coming -- 70 years (v. 10). In the meantime, their times were, to say the least, seismic and challenging.
Questions: What time periods in your lifetime do you think of as "settled," comfortable and peaceful? Why? Why do you think biblical hope usually has a long trajectory? How do you feel about that? What hopes do you have for the time after the pandemic?

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8
For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:
a time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
a time to kill, and a time to heal;
a time to break down, and a time to build up;
a time to weep, and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn, and a time to dance;
a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
a time to seek, and a time to lose;
a time to keep, and a time to throw away;
a time to tear, and a time to sew;
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.
(For context, read 3:1-15.)

Some of the times from this list -- birth, healing, building up, laughing, dancing, etc. -- are such that pleasant or happy adjectives would apply. Other times in this list -- death, mourning, tearing, killing, etc. -- warrant the sorts of adjectives being applied to our time right now.

It's possible to read this catalog of times as if it is saying there is a logical order of things that happen in life, but in the subsequent commentary (vv. 9-15), the author of Ecclesiastes indicates that God determines the times in a way that is inscrutable to humankind.

Questions: What about the times of your life do you find inscrutable? What is your response to such inscrutability? In what ways, if at all, do you see the hand of God in the difficult events of your life? Are some of the things on this list perhaps not the direct work of God, but rather are things that just happen as a matter of course?

James 4:13-15
Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there, doing business and making money." Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that." (No context needed.)

This is not the first time since the start of the pandemic that we have quoted these verses in TWW, for their assertion about the uncertainty of times clearly applies, especially since no one can accurately predict how long our world will be dealing with today's issues.
James is saying that *all times* are uncertain. No one is guaranteed a trouble-free life, and no one can be sure that he or she will have a tomorrow. But James' response is to recognize that we are in God's hands and to trust him.

**Questions:** About what plans of yours, made just a few short months ago, do you now realize you should have said, "Lord willing"? What role ought planning for the future have in a Christian's approach to life? What or who might be overlooked because of future planning? What or who that might have been overlooked or included because of future planning? How do your appointment calendar and uncertainty intersect? How do your appointment calendar and God's will intersect?

**Romans 5:3-5 (CEB)**

But not only that! We even take pride in our problems, because we know that trouble produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope. This hope doesn't put us to shame, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us. (For context, read 5:1-6.)

If you're looking to make sense of the seemingly random downturns of life, you might want to consider what the apostle Paul says here about troubles: They produce *endurance*, which in turn produces *character*, which in turn produces *hope* -- an expectation of good things to come because the love of God has been poured out on us.

Hmm. Starting with trouble and ending with hope. Paul contradicts the prevalent assumption of many that hope is dependent on hopeful circumstances. An old saying has it that "While there is life, there is hope," but Paul gets at a deeper truth: "While there is hope, there is life."

**Questions:** How do you think Paul would have characterized his times? Why?

**Psalm 121:2-8**

My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth.
He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber.
He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.
The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade at your right hand.
The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night.
The LORD will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life.
The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore.
(For context, read 121:1-8)

"Keep" and "keeper" are important words in this psalm. Both come from the Hebrew word *shamar*, which means to "tend" or "watch over."

**Questions:** What does it mean to you that the Lord neither slumbers nor sleeps? In what ways, if any, are you conscious of the Lord keeping "your going out and coming in"? Since even the most devout and faithful of Christians may have severe troubles in life, what does the Lord's keeping mean in those circumstances? Is that sufficient? Why or why not?
For Further Discussion

1. Comment on this, from TWW team member Mary Sells: "In my company and work life, the term I hear most often [now] is 'unprecedented,' meaning nobody has a playbook to know how to make decisions or forecast what to do to avoid costly errors while enduring the pandemic."

2. Contrast #1 with this, from TWW team member Frank Ramirez: "If I had to choose a word for these times, I would use "precedented." Pandemics are a regular part of history, even within living memory. Churchill had to watch the United States become the center of the universe after World War II. The '60s, '68, Rodney King are precedents. My question is where is our memory? Why do we feel we're the first? Do we read history?"

3. Respond to this, from *The Christian Science Monitor* article: "Surveying the world in 1930 from the prison cell to which Italian dictator Benito Mussolini had condemned him, the Communist thinker Antonio Gramsci observed that 'the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.'"
   
   It should be noted that as a Communist, Gramsci's "new" order differed from Mussolini's fascism basically in who would be in charge and what propaganda and methods would be used to seize power. Nonetheless, his reference to "morbid symptoms" seems to echo in many periods of history.

4. What do you make of Fukuyama's end-of-history theory?

5. We referred to Bob Dylan's "The Times They Are A-Changin'"earlier. Read the full lyrics [here](#) and discuss how, though Dylan wrote them in 1963, they apply (or don't apply) to our current times.

**Responding to the News**

This is a good time to listen to the song "My Life Is in Your Hands" sung by Kathy Troccoli. You can read the lyrics [here](#).

For a hymn that reflects our working for God in every situation, look at "Take My Life and Let It Be".

**Prayer**

We are in the midst of trouble, O Lord. Strengthen our faith, and lead us to hope. Amen.