Opinion: The Apocalypse in San Juan Bautista

By Joe Mathews

If the apocalypse comes to California, I'll be ready. After all, I've been to San Juan Bautista.

This summer I visited the San Benito County town, which has centuries of experience with the ending of worlds, as Armageddon drew closer than ever. North Korean missiles can reach California. The American president has the nuclear codes and no impulse control. State-sized icebergs break off Antarctica.

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In California, this moment seems especially apocalyptic. Our governor routinely thunders that unmitigated climate change will make the planet uninhabitable soon. Huge fires rage from Yosemite to Modoc. Even if we somehow survive natural and man-made apocalypse, Elon Musk says robots will just inherit the world anyway.

In these scary times, a small, out-of-the-way place like San Juan Bautista—with fewer than 2,000 people, just off the 101 between Gilroy and Salinas—might seem like an escape. But no California place is more haunted by visions of apocalypse—historically, seismically, cinematically.

Armageddon and the town come together in the most famous local structure, the Mission San Juan Bautista, the 15th of the 21 California missions. It is distinguished by its size—it was the largest mission—and its movie fame, as the setting of the most terrifying scenes of Alfred Hitchcock's "Vertigo."

At the mission, I walked into the Guadalupe Chapel, where the Rev. Alberto Cabrera was saying Mass and singing all the verses of "Amazing Grace," including "The earth shall soon dissolve like snow, / The sun forbear to shine; / But God, who called me here below, / Will be forever mine."

The hymn put me in mind of the apocalyptic story of California's Indians, and their deaths by the thousands, mostly from disease. The mission period saw a decline in the state's native population from 300,000 to 250,000; it collapsed even further after the U.S. conquest, from 150,000 in 1850 to 30,000 a quarter-century later.

This history feels alive in San Juan Bautista. Descendants of decimated local tribes have raised the topic so consistently that Bishop Richard Garcia of Monterey gave a Mass at the mission in 2012, asking for forgiveness for the sins committed against Native Americans in California. Less than a half-mile from the mission, El Teatro Campesino has built a national reputation with diverse works, some of which look back at Mission Indians as well as the Aztec and Mayan civilizations, which suffered their own catastrophes.

For all the weight of past apocalypses, looming destructions are plainly visible at San Juan Bautista. After walking through the mission cemetery, I encountered a U.S. Geological Survey marker noting what lies beneath the mission: the San Andreas Fault. For more than 200 years, the fault has damaged parts of the mission. A major retrofit is being planned for next year, but can the mission stand at this dangerous spot for another 200 years?

From the fault, I walked across the grassy plaza, bordered by preserved buildings in a state historical park. Among the structures is the Castro-Breen Adobe, named half in honor of Patrick Breen, the Irish immigrant who, with his wife and seven children, joined the Donner Party, and lived to tell the tale.

The square is instantly recognizable to movie buffs. Jimmy Stewart and Kim Novak run across it twice in “Vertigo.” Each of those scenes ends with a different blonde woman seemingly falling to her death from the mission tower. The church had no tower when Hitchcock filmed in San Juan Bautista 50 years ago—the one you see in the movie is a Hollywood special effect.

But those cinematic falls in San Juan Bautista, have made “Vertigo” a document for contemplating the fall of humanity. One great philosopher of our age, Jean-Pierre Dupuy, a Frenchman who teaches at Stanford and is close to Gov. Jerry Brown, has written that the movie inspired his own career as “an enlightened doomsayer” who developed “a metaphysics of the age of catastrophe that awaits us.”

Dupuy devotes the epilogue of his masterful book, “The Mark of The Sacred,” to “Vertigo’s” complicated plot, and especially to how Stewart’s character allows himself to be twice deceived by Novak’s character, only realizing the peril after it’s too late.

In this, Dupuy sees humanity’s failure to recognize how close we are to the apocalypse. The apocalypse, Dupuy writes, is nothing like death, which is part of life. The apocalypse presents us with the greater horror of nothingness. If humanity ends, it will be as if all the people who came before—Alfred Hitchcock, the Donner Party, or California Indians—had never existed.

To save ourselves, Dupuy argues, we must treat the apocalypse

as inevitable, stare as deeply as possible into the abyss, so that we inspire ourselves to avoid falling in.

So, please, visit the apocalypse as soon as possible. San Juan Bautista is nigh.

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