

On not being left behind

By [Deanna A. Thompson](#)

October 10, 2014

In theaters now, Nicholas Cage is taking us to the beginning of the end of time. A time when passengers vanish mid-flight, cars lose their drivers, and those who aren't raptured face a violent world and a monumental choice: follow the Antichrist toward destruction or follow the righteous and be saved from the world. It's the end of the world as we know it, and no one's feeling fine.

Years ago, when the *Left Behind* series topped the bestseller lists, a friend and colleague of mine was on fire over the books. What bothered Tim most was that *Left Behind's* apocalyptic sensibility was grounded in fear—and largely disconnected from the gospel. For Tim, any truly biblical apocalyptic must situate such upheaval within the context of Jesus' story. The Incarnation means that biblical apocalyptic is about moving deeper *into* the world, about protesting the ways the here and now fails to reflect the vision of life with God in the time to come. Books like Revelation aim to comfort, not terrify—their harsh judgment is for the evils of this world, evils that will one day be no more.

Tim lives in an Alzheimer's care center now. On a recent visit, I told him I'd been rereading his essay on apocalyptic and not being *Left Behind*. ("Images of wholeness and totality dominate the picture" of the city of God, "telling us that we cannot fully be ourselves only by ourselves.")

Tim blinked unknowingly. He seemed surprised and delighted that he had written such a piece and that I had been reading it. As the conversation waned, I told him I'd like to read the 23rd Psalm out loud. He said he didn't know that one. I began reading. He inhaled and smiled a bit as he said, "Oh! I *do* know that one."

Visits with Tim these days are punctuated by fewer and fewer moments of the lucidity, wit, and insight he used to bring to every exchange. There are more and more moments of silence, where words seem just out of reach (for both of us, but especially for Tim). As we sit in his room, it's hard not to think about how he and his fellow residents are being left behind—left behind by the rest of us who can

formulate opinions about books and movies, who don't need to live behind doors without handles and windows without latches.

"It's a cruel disease," the care attendant said as he buzzed us out of the care center. Yes, one of the many cruel diseases and evils of this world we inhabit. Yet I know that Tim spent his career—his life, really—professing the value, the beauty, and the grace of this world, loved so dearly by God that God ventured deep into its messiness and is at work transforming it into a new world. This new world often seems far away when I'm sitting with Tim. At the same time, as a former student of Tim's and of mine put it, "even if he doesn't know us, I think it matters to him to see that we know and love him."

I'm indebted to my friend and colleague for many things, not least among them a view of the apocalyptic that doesn't involve being left behind. Tim's is an apocalyptic of hope that imagines a future where there's no more crying, no more dying. This world is not a backdrop for the rapture; it's a place where we live with brokenness and hope for more, a place where we glimpse a city where we need each other to be fully ourselves. I'm grateful to Tim for this gift.