

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 ascendancy 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:

[Navigating Uncertainty: As Global Order Creaks, What Comes Next? *The Christian Science Monitor*](#)

[Why History Didn't End. *Theos*](#)

[The Best Words to Use During Unprecedented Times. *Dictionary.com*](#)

[Social Change and Linguistic Change: The Language of Covid-19. *OED*](#)

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?