

Storms, earthquakes, North Korea and now the Las Vegas massacre. We have to wonder: ‘What’s next?’

When the month began, a confluence of hurricanes, floods, earthquakes, wildfires and a brewing international nuclear confrontation already had some Americans thinking about End Times.

Then Las Vegas, the nation’s playground, witnessed the worst mass shooting in U.S. history — the latest in this peerless series of catastrophes. Some were natural, some man-made. Together, they’ve shadowed a usually optimistic nation with a cloud of sorrow and anxiety.

You didn’t have to be in Vegas, Seattle, Houston, Key West or San Juan, or have relatives in Mexico, or live in the Inter-mountain West with a respiratory condition, to be worried. A nation that had thought itself numbed to tragedy is realizing that no matter how bad things are, they apparently can always get worse.

“Why?” asked country music star Blake Shelton in a tweet after the shooting. That was one question, shared many times by many others. There was another: “What’s next?”

A summer that seemed destined to be remembered for its magnificent solar eclipse had lurched suddenly toward the eve of destruction. And autumn hasn’t been much better.



Damaged and destroyed houses in the neighborhood of Toa Baja, Puerto Rico, 11 days after Hurricane Maria hit the island. (Photo: Carrie Cochran and Ricky Flores, USA TODAY NETWORK)

So much has gone wrong so fast it's fair to review the overlapping calamities:

- In the span of two weeks, two major hurricanes, Harvey and Irma, hit the continental U.S., the first time two category 4 storms have ever done so in a single season. Then a third storm, Maria, clobbered the U.S. territory of Puerto Rico, producing a level of misery that still may not have crested.
- Mexico was shaken by two earthquakes 12 days apart that killed hundreds of people. The second occurred on the anniversary of the 1985 Mexico City earthquake that killed thousands. That quake had been commemorated, and a national earthquake drill held, just two hours before the ground again began to shake on Sept. 19.
- Wildfires, spurred by some of the driest, hottest late summer weather on record, consumed an area in the West 50% larger than the state of New Jersey. As air quality plummeted across Washington State, the governor declared a state of emergency and told everyone in some areas to stay indoors.
- The leaders of the U.S. and North Korea traded insults and threats. President Trump ridiculed his own secretary of state's efforts to negotiate with the Kim Jong Un regime to peacefully resolve the nuclear faceoff.

Trump tweeted that Rex Tillerson “is wasting his time trying to negotiate with Little Rocket Man...”



The Eagle Creek wildfire burns on the Oregon side of the Columbia River Gorge near Cascade Locks, Ore., in early September. (Photo: AP)

The natural disasters produced images that unsettled even those nowhere near them. Consider just the wildfires.

In normally wet Seattle, which on Aug. 8 recorded its record 52nd straight day without rain, ash from Central Washington fires fell like snow and covered the city with a dense smoke cloud. In Montana, wildfires closed the western part of Glacier National Park’s famous Going-to-the-Sun Road while the eastern portion was closed by ice and snow. In Oregon, a photo showed golfers in the foreground playing through as a huge forest fire roared in the background.

“Yes,” the Dallas Morning News editorialized last month, “it does feel like Mother Nature is just done with us.”

Her children were not. In Las Vegas, a man rich enough to have two planes and an arsenal of guns opened fire Sunday night from the upper floor of a luxury hotel, hitting or injuring hundreds of concertgoers across the street. As of this writing, 59 had died.

The crises brought out the best in some people. Texas saw an American Dunkirk, with more than 15,000 rescued from high waters by a motley array of craft. And Mexicans spontaneously formed bucket brigades to remove rubble and search for survivors in the ruins of hundreds of collapsed schools and other buildings.

More: [September was a hellish month for hurricanes. What will October bring?](#)

More: [The land of the stars & stripes has become a country of stress & strife.](#)

More: [Las Vegas shooting now tops list of worst mass shootings in U.S. history](#)

More: [Here are the worst hurricanes and floods in U.S. history](#)

But for all too many, it was all too much.

Tamara Harpster, 54, of Lakeside, Calif., wrote on Facebook that when she learned of the shooting “I felt numb.” After the last month, “it seems like ‘Oh well, just another day in a sucky world now.’ ... I feel such a loss of control and a realization that there is nothing an individual can do to stop these horrible things from happening.”

And yet, she wrote, “I want somehow to fix things and make them stop.”

Daniel Gardner, who teaches communications at Mississippi State, says that while most people in the rural South shake their heads over the troubles and move on, the millennials he teaches are different: With instantaneous communication via social media, they are “easily shaken emotionally, and prone to be more naive and gullible. ... So the confluence of bad events makes them feel more vulnerable.”

A 15-year-old with the Twitter handle of Mickel made a similar point: “i don’t like the general direction of where the world is going.”

The question was why it seemed to be going there.

There was an obvious answer — coincidence — and on one level, it was all explicable.

Storms? That’s why they call this hurricane season. And until 2017 it had been 12 years since any hurricane of such intensity made continental U.S. landfall.

Quakes? Mexico sits on unstable tectonic plates.

Fires? Forests have been burning in North America since before any civilization.

Korea? The Korean War never officially ended when hostilities ceased in 1953. Sabers have been rattling ever since.

As for Las Vegas, America since Columbine has repeatedly demonstrated what happens when a wealthy, historically violent nation with many angry, mentally disturbed residents has loose gun laws.

Some blamed global warming for the storms and the fires; some blamed Trump for Korea and the halting Puerto Rico relief effort.

Others saw a higher authority in control.

‘What else is needed to get our attention?’ asked Michael L. Brown, the conservative host of the nationally syndicated radio show, *The Line of Fire*.

“We need to get on our faces before the Lord, acknowledging our own sins and shortcomings, not pointing the finger at others but rather at ourselves. And whatever our views on climate control and gun control and immigration reform and President Trump, we need to implore the only one who can heal our land.”

In a video he posted online, actor Kirk Cameron (*Growing Pains*) called the hurricanes “a spectacular display of God’s immense power” and said, “weather is sent to cause us to respond to God in humility, awe and repentance.”

Was Judgement Day at hand? Several who studied the question had set the date at Sept. 23. But as the day passed and the tribulations continued, some didn’t need obscure scriptural passages or complicated astrological projections to feel the end was near.

That’s one theology. Another is held by the Rev. Ryan Moore of First Presbyterian Church in Tulsa. He told the *Tulsa World* that he doesn’t spend much time trying to predict when The End is coming, because a daily faith matters more.

“But with all that’s going on in the world,” he admits, “you can’t help but be a little bit apocalyptic.”

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