

Robert Frost's poem "Fire and Ice" speaks to the theme of today's readings, the day of the Lord or the end of the world:

Some say the world will end in fire,
Some say in ice.
From what I've tasted of desire
I hold with those who favor fire.
But if it had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate
To say that for destruction ice
Is also great
And would suffice.

In today's Gospel, while some people were describing the beauty of the temple, Jesus tells his disciples that it will all come tumbling down. They ask him when this will happen. Jesus cautions them about being fooled by doomsday tricksters and feeling terrified: yet he also lists some terrifying things that will happen. These include conflicts between nations, destructive natural phenomena, and great signs in the heavens. Then it gets personal: Jesus' followers will be arrested, persecuted, betrayed, and killed. The good news is that they won't lose anything - that's the meaning of "not a hair of your head will perish" - and they will be saved.

We know life is precarious. Most anything can happen. History has seen terrible wars. During World War I and afterward, one and a half million Armenians were murdered by Ottoman Turks. And in World War II, six million Jews were obliterated as victims of Nazi Germany's genocidal policy.

More than 99 per cent of all the species that have ever lived are estimated to have become extinct. A six-mile wide asteroid that struck the Yucatan peninsula of Mexico some 65 million years ago is thought to have wiped out the dinosaurs.

97 per cent of climate scientists are concerned about the harm humans

are causing to the world by burning fossil fuels. Extinction seems to be part of the life cycle of all species: might we be speeding up this process for ourselves? Fires in California and the ice sheets melting in the Arctic and Antarctic: maybe it's not fire or ice, but fire and ice that will spell our doom. Who knows what will happen.

People have been worried and terrified about what the world is coming to for ages. But of course no one knows what the future holds. Meanwhile, the world is still here, and so are we. So how do we live?

Paul's Second letter to the Thessalonians tells us that some of the people in Thessalonica, Greece, nearly two thousand years ago were living lives of laziness. Having become captivated by the illusion of a doomsday scenario, it seems they were so convinced Jesus was returning soon that they decided to give up working. With plenty of time on their hands, they were meddling in other people's business. But Paul had a different point of view: he said all those who gave up working should also give up eating.

This is not the usual idea that all of us should pay our own way. It is to affirm that everyone is called to contribute to the community's good. While our salvation is totally a gift of God's grace, this does not mean that individuals are free to consume what others through their labor are providing. Each of us is called not only to provide for our own selves, but for the communities to which we belong. That's one of the reasons we pay taxes, we give to the church, and we donate to charities: we realize that we're all in this together. So at its root, Paul's message is that one of the ways we live as followers of Jesus is by being faithful and responsible stewards of God's gifts.

Last week, our Design and Feasibility Committee interviewed two stewardship consultants. In both of those meetings, the consultants linked stewardship and discipleship. Their point was that if we are faithful disciples, we also are faithful stewards. This is Paul's point. The reverse of this also is true: if we are not faithful stewards, then our discipleship and our love are empty. At best, we are "a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal." (I Corinthians 13:1b)

These are hard words: hard words we need to hear, and hard words we need to act upon. If the words of today's readings merely go in one ear

and out the other, we have failed to hear them and apply them to our lives. We are called to contribute to the good of the whole: in our families, in our schools, in our church, in our nation, and in our world.

So in the midst of general hand wringing and despair about the state of present day affairs, the people of God do not lose heart; instead, we take heart. Whatever our challenges, as disciples of Jesus, we trust in the goodness of Christ and his ongoing love and care for us. That makes us free to give of ourselves, sharing our time, our talents, and our treasure. And we do this not only for the sake of Christ and his church, but also for the sake of the world that Jesus came to save. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.” (*NRSV*, John 3:16) Our belief, our trust in Christ is the basis and foundation for our giving. Nothing will ever exhaust God’s love and giving to the world in Jesus. We can count on it. And because of that, God and the communities to which we belong should be able to count on us.

Her neighbor Helen brought Lila a large bag of peaches that came from a tree bending low over the fence their yards shared in Denver, Colorado. “The tree is loaded with fruit,” she said. “Please, take all you want.”

Helen’s husband, Earl, had an elderly friend who lived in a nursing home. One day while eating canned peaches, Earl’s friend bit into a pit. He asked for someone to bring an empty coffee can from the trash and to fill it with soil. Earl’s friend pushed his peach pit into the soil and set the can on his windowsill.

Amazingly, the pit sprouted and the plant thrived. Eventually it outgrew the can. The man with the peach pit in the coffee can asked his friend Earl to take the little tree and plant it in the ground, which Earl did in his own backyard. That tree bore fruit before its early death from a spring hailstorm, and from one of its pits grew the tree by the fence full of fruit beside Lila’s yard. Earl and Helen shared the peaches with their neighbors, but still had dozens of them remaining. In remembrance of how the peaches came to grow by her fence, Lila took three bags of them to a nursing home.

The man who started it all with the pit from a canned peach didn’t live to see this harvest. But when he looked at that pit years ago he saw the

promise of fresh fruit. That has changed the way Lila sees herself as she ages and struggles with health issues. It has changed the way she sees other people, who are so often like a displaced pit in need of fertile soil.¹

There's a story that Martin Luther once was asked what he would do if he knew that the world would end tomorrow. According to this legend, Luther said, "Even if I knew that tomorrow the world would go to pieces, I would still plant my apple tree."

Someday, we know not when or how, the day of the Lord will arrive and human life on earth will come to an end. It could happen today or tomorrow, but it probably won't. And it may not happen for hundreds, thousands, or millions of years. We live in this uncertain and mysterious meantime, in this interim between.

In this time between, Jesus tells us our job is to be faithful and to testify to the truth of God's love for the world. One of the ways we do that is by doing what Christ does: spending our selves in love for the world. We become not merely consumers of the world's resources, which while abundant, are not infinite. So we grow as faithful stewards of everything God has given us - of our time, our talent, our treasure, and of creation itself. For Christ's sake and the sake of the world, this is how we are called to live.

¹ A narrative on the theme of "Promise" by Lila Docken Bauman: *The Christian Century*, July 31, 2019, p. 21.