

I have two greetings to give today: *“Happy Thanksgiving!”* and ... *“The end of the world is at hand!”* Do those two sentences go together in your mind?

I think they do. This week we are celebrating the harvest of the fields of the earth. Our Harvest Home celebration is a special outpouring of sharing through the food pantry some of the bounty from harvests around the world. And we celebrate with thanksgiving to God in this time of harvest. It is the harvest of creation. And our scripture reminds us that there will come an ultimate harvest of creation, when all that is good will be gathered into the storehouse of God’s eternal provision, even as all that is chaff will be cast aside. That will be the end of the world as we know it, the harvest of all creation, and God’s people will give thanks to be harvested into God’s Kingdom – an eternal Thanksgiving of Harvest Home!

The Kidz Klub Bible studies came to a conclusion this week with a quick study of the ending of John’s Revelation. We read from Revelation 21 about the new heaven and new earth that will come when the first heaven and first earth have passed away. That was hard to imagine! *“Will it really happen?”* was the question. Yes. That’s what the whole Bible is about – how God is working to save people from evil. So yes, it is promised that there will come a time when all that is evil, all that is harming God’s Creation will come to an end, so that God’s people can live with God fully and completely – redeemed! Or we might say: *“Harvested!”*

It’s not something we usually are eager for when we are young. We want to grow up, we want to see what life is all about. We don’t usually want the world to come to an end. We sort of figure that the evil in the world will still be around long after we have lived and died, so we just try to do our best to get through life on earth, hopefully doing good until a ripe old age. We try to not get too cozy with the evils around us.

When I was in high school – in boarding school in Africa – some of us 9th and 10th grade boys formed a quartet. And we sang: *“This world is not my home; I’m just a-passing through. My treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue. The angels beckon me from heaven’s open door, and I can’t feel at home in this world any more.*

O Lord, you know, I have no friend like you. If heaven's not my home, then, Lord, what will I do? The angels beckon me from heaven's open door, and I can't feel at home in this world any more."

The hymn calls us to move on to another world, moving out of this world to get beyond it. And yet scripture calls us to make a faithful witness *in* this world, knowing that God so loved the world that he sent his only Son to be the Savior of the world. We pray for the Spirit of the Risen Lord to come and transform this world around us, to redeem God's Creation, to make it ready to produce a good harvest for eternity.

One of the most ancient prayers of the church is "*Maranatha!*" which means, "*Our Lord, come!*" Please come! It is a prayer that Jesus will come and finish his work of conquering the powers of sin and death, of giving spiritual life to all who are faithful. It is a prayer that draws us towards the Harvest of all harvests, the end of the age.

When we pray for God's salvation – when we pray for good to overcome evil, we are in effect praying that all that is less than good will come to an end. Is that what you expect will happen? Is that what you believe God will some day do? If so, then shouldn't we be eager to set people free from all evil, so that they are not destroyed along with the evil, when the Lord gets rid of all evil? Isn't it important to align ourselves more closely with Jesus, getting rid of attitudes and actions that will be extinguished on that Day, allowing the Lord to cleanse us from guilt and shame, and to bring forth in us the good qualities and strengths of spirit that Jesus wants us to have, so that we can be ready to greet him whenever he might choose to come?

At the Young Adult Retreat Friday evening and yesterday morning, we talked about the spiritual fruits that the New Testament says we should be bringing forth. It's a familiar passage, I think. Galatians 5:19-25, "*The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the **fruit** of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control [although at the retreat we heard it translated as God's control of our self-strivings].*

Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.” The call of Jesus is let those spiritual qualities of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and God-control-of-self be visible in us – as the fruits of our living, fruits ready for the harvest!

Our retreat leader was Kirby Dubble, former pastor of the Mt. Wilson congregation. I like Kirby’s story of the person who responded to a sermon about patience by saying, *“But I’m just not patient by nature.”* To which Kirby reports that he replied, *“Then it will be all the more obvious that it is God at work in you when you are patient; people will know it’s not by your power, but by God’s power at work in you.”*

What fruits do *you* need the Lord to bring forth in you? Each of the ten of us at the Young Adult Retreat identified the spiritual fruit for which we need help from God and prayers from friends, and the group laid hands on each of us in prayer.

Are *you* developing spiritual fruit? Harvest time is coming. Will you be ready to give thanks – whenever the new earth and new heaven are scheduled to arrive – to give thanks that God is bringing forth in you the fruits that Jesus will be looking for when he comes again. The time of his return is coming closer.

On National Public Radio this week I heard an interview with Rakim, a well-respected hiphop rapper, who recently put out an album called *“Seventh Seal.”* Yes, Rakim said, it is based on chapter 8 of John’s Revelation, where the seventh seal is opened and terrible storms with thunder and lightning, earthquakes, fires, and more are unleashed. I think it’s time for people to take life seriously, Rakim was saying. There certainly are plenty of fires, storms (Rakim specifically mentioned hurricanes), and earthquakes, as well as wars and rumors of war (which is a sign that Jesus talks about with regard to the end of the world). Lots of folks worry about these things. They’re not ready for the harvest of all harvests to take place.

People who aren’t ready for God’s harvest of creation avoid the book of Revelation. Even the journal for preaching that I often use for research had not dealt with this passage for the 15 years after 1994 until 2009, and even now, when they focused

on it this year, they focused on what I believe are side issues. A lot of people are afraid of what they think its message is.

At our youth Halloween party this year, Angela and Trenton did a great job of leading devotions. The focus was on how we do not need to be afraid; the Lord will be our help. Then our thoughts about trusting in God got a bit sidetracked and we got into talking about the end of the world, which some people want to designate as 2012. There's some movie coming out, and – as some of us have seen happen over and over again – people who focus on declaring a specific time for Christ's return seem to delight in making other people afraid. I wanted to make sure that the youth know that time and again over the centuries there have been people who thought they could figure out the exact time when Christ would return and the world would come to an end. And they have always been wrong. I was aware that we had some new youth among us that evening, and I wanted to make sure we did not scare them. Unfortunately, as I was attempting to give some reassurance, some seemed to be thinking, *“well, if it hasn't happened yet and people keep on thinking it will, maybe this will be the time that it actually happens,”* as in – what are the odds.

That got me going big time. Several places the New Testament says that we don't know when the end will come. Even Jesus says (recorded in Matthew 24:36), *“No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son [i.e., not Jesus himself], but only the Father.”* And when it does happen, I concluded, as I talked with the youth, we don't need to be afraid because God will take care of us – that is the heart of our faith. But one youth who could only think about the end of the world part, got up and said, *“I don't want to talk about it; I don't want to die.”* And when I was a teenager and young adult, I felt the same way. But as i have gotten older, my perspective on the end of the world has changed.

I don't think it should be a fearful thing. The book of Revelation was written for the purpose of giving hope and courage to God's people. No matter how bad things get, even if the creation should fall apart around us – as the book of Revelation says will happen in the battle against evil and sin – John's Revelation wants us to know that Jesus Christ will still be our Savior and the Lord over all. In the end he will be the Victor, and will provide a new earth and a new heaven after the old is harvested.

Those who bear the fruits of faith will be brought by that harvest into the very presence of God and will rejoice in God's love and care forever and ever.

"The time is near," John's Revelation chapter 1 declares. The one *"who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood,"* so that we might belong together in God's Kingdom and serve the heavenly Father together – this same one *"is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him."* No one is going to miss out. Even those who have rejected Jesus and pierced him will see him and will mourn. They will suddenly realize what they have missed out on, and will grieve to have made such a mistake. They will see that the one who created all things (the Alpha) will be the same one who will gather in the harvest of all things (the Omega – last letter of the alphabet ... if it had been written in English, it would read: the A and the Z, the first and the last). The Creator will be the Harvester – the Alpha and the Omega!

We don't know when it will take place. We simply need to be ready at any time.

So this Thanksgiving is a good time to remind ourselves, that just as the crops reach a harvest time when they are expected to show their fruitfulness, so we and the world will reach a harvest time. Whenever that may be, show your spiritual fruits! Give thanks for all that God will rejoice in when he harvests his Creation of you!

Not ready yet? Give thanks, then, that the Lord tarries – that there is still time to open your heart and your mind and your body to the indwelling of God's Holy Spirit ... to receive cleansing grace and to have spiritual fruits grow in you. Ask the Lord of the harvest to make you ready. Don't put it off. As Romans 13:11-12, 14 says, *"The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light ... clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ."*

"The time is near!" The harvest of all harvests is coming! Let it be a celebration!

Hymn *Come, Ye Thankful People, Come! Raise the Song of Harvest Home* 94