THE END OF THE WORLD

--a sermon by the Rev. H. Paul Santmire
University Lutheran Church
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"But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and the works that are upon it will be burned up."(II Peter 3:10)

This is the ultimate in hell-fire and damnation. Not only are individual souls here consigned to fire, but the whole physical cosmos. Suddenly our whole world will collapse together into one universal fire.

Very few people believe that anymore. For one thing we are very much aware of the mythological character of this kind of language. For another thing the total dissolution of everything hardly takes into account the law of the conservation of energy. Beyond that, if we look forward toward any end of the whole cosmos we will probably think of it in terms of all things becoming colder and colder and finally coming to a dead, static state of frigidity. So we find it rather easy to forget about talk or thought concerning the end of the world. The threat of thermo-nuclear holocaust may bother us a little, but by and large we men seem to be in charge here, and it appears probable that we will refrain from blowing ourselves up.

Yet there's much more to biblical thinking about the end of the world than we sometimes realize. To begin with, the New Testament is hardly concerned with the how of the coming of the end. It's concerned chiefly with the fact of the end, very little with the factual details. Our text is the only instance in the New Testament, out of scores of references, where fire is specified as a condition of the forth-coming end. This is surprising, since the idea of a conflagration at the end was rather common in the first century. The New Testament is chiefly interested in the reality of the coming end, not so much in the details.

Also there's an awareness in the New Testament itself that our conceptualization of the coming end cannot easily do justice to the actual character of that end. At first, to be sure, early Christians -- and perhaps Jesus himself -- expected the end of the world to occur in their lifetime. Yet Jesus's teaching contains an admission of ignorance concerning the date of the end. As today's Gospel lesson concludes, "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."(Mt. 25:13) The second and third generation of Christians were even more acutely aware of their lack of knowledge in this respect. Our Epistle lesson, for example, states plainly that God's time and man's expectations do not coincide in a one-to-one relationship. "But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day."(II Peter 3:8)

In a word, New Testament thinking about the end of the world is hardly as naive as we might at first be inclined to believe. Long before the rise of modern myth-theory and long before the rise of modern science, the New Testament writers sensed many of the difficulties of speaking about a coming end of the world.

Yet they held on to the notion. Notwithstanding all the problems, they generally affirmed that the end of the world was indeed coming. Why? We might say it was because they viewed life as a journey, not as a sedentary, static state of affairs. They saw life as a very specific kind of historical pilgrimage, with a point of departure and a goal. And at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end they saw the power and promise of their God and Lord. They even went so far as to believe that the whole universe, nature no less than history, was participating in that pilgrimage under the universal direction of God.

Do you think you are going anywhere? Do you think our world is going anywhere ultimately? And if so, where?

Consider this early poem by Carl Sandberg, entitled "Limited."

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I am riding on a limited express, one of the crack trains of the nation.
Hurtling across the prairie into blue haze and dark air go fifteen
all-steel coaches holding a thousand people.

This is our technological society, is it not? Today we would perhaps speak of a jet-liner rather than that crack train, but other than that, that's where we are: on the move, riding forward into the future on the back of a machine. ...Then Sandberg adds in parentheses:

(All the coaches shall be scrap and rust and all the men and women
laughing in the diners and sleepers shall pass to ashes.)

A not very pleasant thought, but true. The crack train or the jet liner won't survive forever. Nor shall the passengers. We all are heading for ashes. ...At the end of his poem Sandberg says,

I ask a man in the smoker where he is going and he answers: "Omaha."

Now someone from Omaha may not get the point. But I think the rest of us do. Here we are hurtling along on this crack train, itself and ourselves destined for ashes, and the only place we think we are going is Omaha. One wonders whether the whole trip is worth it. One wonders whether all the exams and papers, all the budgets and the struggles to keep harmony in the family, and all the momentous political debates and decisions mean anything at all if we are only going to Omaha.

And here our sensibility is further disturbed, I think, by the apparent findings of modern science. One can raise the question whether the whole affair of life makes any difference if everything is going to end up in a dead, static state of frigidity, a kind of cosmic Omaha. No wonder murky despair seems to be so characteristic of our time.

This past Labor Day CBS carried a report concerning six Florida teenagers who had been killed in their bathing suits returning from the beach, killed in an automobile accident. The very next item on this broadcast was a commercial. It began: "I've go news for you, mom, the kids will be back to school before you know it." Those who took the trouble to put the news item and the commercial together might have begun to wonder where we really are going.

They may well have wanted to speak as Eliot has spoken, --

Where is there an end of it, the soundless wailing,
The silent withering of autumn flowers
Dropping their petals and remaining motionless;
Where is there an end to the drifting wreckage...?

To be sure, we Americans have our happy pop-art and our happy happenings. We Americans don't really despair, people say. But I wonder whether our happy pop-art and our happy happenings are not so much whistling in the dark. Much of it, indeed, isn't even happy. One pop work I saw not too long ago was made out of an automobile wreck; it was entitled "Our Lady of the Highways."

Someone said to me the other day: "If only Christianity were really true." This question is at the point where Christian faith can begin. It's spoken from an awareness of the movement of the world toward Omaha, the movement of the world toward dead frigidity. If only Christianity were really true! And here is the scandal of Christian faith in all its sharpness in today's Epistle: "But according to his promise we wait for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells."(II Peter 3:13)

This points to a transcendent city beyond all our Omahas, to a transcendent world beyond all our drifting wreckages. This points to a transcendent fulfilment and vindication of the pilgrimage of life. Says the prophet Isaiah in our Lesson:

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;

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Then shall the lame man leap like a hart,
and the tongue of the dumb sing for joy.
For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert.(Is. 35:5f.)

It's admittedly difficult to live ourselves into this kind of poetic expectation. But let's not put up any needless obstacles for ourselves. Remember that it's chiefly a matter of the reality of the end, not the details of the end. Remember, too, that this isn't a matter which we can easily comprehend, for God's reckoning is not our reckoning. God's time is not our time. But above all remember that it's a matter of God himself bringing all things to their fulfilment. God himself will finally open up the door to our universe from the outside. And that will be the end.

That is to say, we look for new heavens and a new earth not because we have confidence in the course of our universe, but because we have confidence in the power and promise of God. The transcendent city beyond our Omahas, and the resplendent universe beyond our cold world, is to be built by God and God alone.

This is the challenge which comes to us at the end of the Church Year: to renew our confidence in the power and promise of our God. That is a way out of our murky despair, into joy and hope.

Martin Luther was once asked what he would do if he knew the world were about to come to an end. He replied that he would plant an apple tree.

That kind of simple joy and hope is possible in this life, when we know who it is who is bringing the pilgrimage of our world to an end, and have confidence in his power and in his promise. "According to his promise we wait for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells."