Today's worship and the readings from the lectionary present us with a challenge, a set of conflicting messages that are difficult to harmonize.

There is a clear message that treasure awaits us in heaven, with the assertion that what is coming is somehow different and better than the physical reality that surrounds us. No amount of theological gymnastics allow us to escape the clear message that Jesus, and the author of Hebrews, were referring to something different, something other than what was in front of them, something better than the status quo.

Yet today's worship has been designated as a way to celebrate and strengthen our commitment to care for the physical stuff of God's creation, to direct our attention to the care and stewardship of the present world. While Jesus is telling us to be ready at any time for the new reality to appear, to be alert and to have our lamps lit, ready to welcome God's kingdom, we also remember Jesus parable of the talents in which the servants were expected to show good stewardship with what the master had left in their care. What we do in the here and now matters.

Even the story of Abram doubting God's promise of numerous descendants highlights this tension. The Genesis account of Abram becoming Abraham makes clear that Abram is looking for real, live descendants in the flesh. While the author of the Hebrews acknowledges that the numerous descendants promised to Abram and Sara did appear, that account immediately flips to the expectation of the heavenly city to come, the promises of God not yet seen.

As we consider our calling to be good stewards of Creation, this tension appears to be a stumbling block. If we a looking forward to a heavenly city, something better than we have now, it is pretty tempting to go the next step to thinking and saying that what we we have right now doesn't matter, that we don't need to take care of Creation because it will soon be replaced by a new one.

The folly of such thinking is apparent when we consider what our world would be like if every decision we had made about our environment had disregarded the consequences for this world we live in now. We went a long way down that road in this country for while, until we saw what happened--when the Cuyahoga River in Cleveland became so polluted it caught on fire and Lake Erie ceased to support abundant fish life, we enacted the Clean Water Act to protect our waters from pollution. When the air in our major cities became so filled with smog we couldn't go outside, we enacted the Clean Air Act. None-the-less, we still resist such efforts. Indeed, some people of faith say that we should not be worried about this physical world, and that we can in fact, disregard ecological limits.

The gospels dealt with that idea rather emphatically early in Jesus ministry, right at the beginning, when he was tempted by Satan in the wilderness. When asked to disregard one of the fundamental facts of nature, that is gravity, and throw himself off the temple and be rescued by angels, Jesus called it for what it was--an immoral testing of God's patience. We clearly cannot disregard the physical characteristics of our world and expect God to rescue us.

The standard explanation for our willingness to test God and abuse creation is greed. We enjoy physical comforts and security, and want more of them, and thus take more than we should from the environment. Not just extracting wealth in form of food and material goods, but also damaging the capacity of our environment to provide us with the clean air and water we all need to live.

But over the past two weeks I have begun to wonder if the problem isn't deeper than greed. Maybe it is really about fear, specifically, the fear of death.

The fact that our bodies will eventually die challenges humans of all cultures and faiths. While God's Creation, in all it many aspects, teaches us that physical death is the way the creation renews itself, making the materials of our physical bodies available for other creatures to use, we still fear death, afraid of both the process of dying and the uncertainty about what lies beyond. The greed that drives us to mistreat creation may just be a cover for our fear of death, and an expression of our belief that if we just have more, more food, more stuff, more wealth, we can keep that inevitable death at bay.

As happens more commonly than we like to admit, my community of faith that has been teaching me about this.

As many of you know, our brother Stan Benson has not been doing well over the past few years. Arthritis and leukemia, as well as the general issues that come with being 80 plus years old, have been limiting his strength and mobility, although it has not diminished his cheerful spirit. A couple of weeks ago, the leukemia came back with a vengeance, leaving Stan's body without much of an immune system. He consulted with his doctors about his treatment options, discussed the situation with his family, and came to the conclusion that he should place his life more completely in God's hands. Stan began to prepare for his imminent death.

Since he has been given the gift of a clear mind and the time for reflection, he has requested something that we have discussed here at a First Lutheran forum --he has asked fora "green" or more ecologically friendly burial. Making connections with his time as missionary in Tanzania, where he worked alongside fellow Christians who lived more simply in material terms, Stan does not want his earthly wealth to go to hiding the reality of death. He wants a simple pine box instead of an elaborate coffin, no preservation efforts with toxic chemicals, no heavy vault to delay the inevitable decay.

As I watched Stan's resolve to face his own death, and to lessen his material impact on the earth as he dies, I realized that he is living by and in his faith, confidently resting on the knowledge that physical death is not to be feared. Contrary to the idea that the promise of a heavenly city should make us disregard and misuse Creation, Stan is free to make choices that honor Creation. He has heard today's Gospel lesson:

'Jesus said to his disciples, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.'

Brothers and sisters in Christ, Stan Benson did not set out to teach us a lesson, he has just been trying to put his affairs in order after a long and full life, and to be faithful to the God who called him to a life of service. But in his faithfulness, he has pointed us to way to live beyond our fear of death, to be more faithful stewards of creation.