

Not fearful but watchful

Mark 13:26-37

November 29, 2020

Happy Advent and happy new year! Today is the first Sunday of Advent and, also, the first day of Christian calendar. On normal or secular New Year's Day, we make New Year's Day resolutions. But on Christian New Year's Day we hear two messages from the Bible. I want to warn you that these messages are not cheerful or delightful. The stories are not about a young couple of Mary and Joseph, or delightful angels and shepherds, or helpful innkeeper or faithful wisemen. We don't hear them yet. Interestingly, the lectionary assigns us on this day to read the Bible passages of Eschatology, the end time. Today's gospel reading says, "He will come in the clouds with great power and splendor and heavenly angels. On those days the sun will become dark, and the moon will not give its light. The stars will fall from the sky, and the planets and other heavenly bodies will be shaken." In Advent season we are in between the end time and the birth of the Messiah. It is time for us to wake up and to watch out on both ways. Pastors are reluctant to preach on the first Sunday of Advent because it is right after Thanksgiving Day when they still feel like to rest and to enjoy the warmth of friends, food, and family, rather than talking about the eschatology that they themselves don't know the meaning well enough to preach about it. I do not preach this passage every year. Sometimes, I just skip this passage and jump to the familiar Christmas songs and stories because I still struggle with it and I am not sure how and what to preach about it.

But we Christians have to preach and listen to the end time first, before we celebrate the beautiful and familiar Christmas stories. Why is it that way? Why do we have to hear the dreadful and fearful news of the end time first to move to the good news of the birth of Jesus Christ, the son of God? It makes us ponder on how to live during in-between time and the meaning of it. It is like a short dash on any gravestone between the birthday and the death day, between the first day and the last day of anyone's life. We may think everything is in that short dash between two dates. But in Christianity we are taught to look at our lives from the end time to learn why to live and how to live our current daily life in the dash. We do not live on a linear timeline like a dash, but a mirror view timeline looking the present from the future.

I have a sister who is two years older than me. She was born with an illness and because of it she had a big surgery twice when she was still young. She stayed home for one year in high school after the second surgery for healing and recovery. It was that serious. For the same illness she had another surgery a couple of years ago. She told me when she was lying down on a cold metal surgery bed in the operation room again, she thought, this time could be her last day. She thought about her son who was one year older than my son, Tim. She couldn't stop thinking about him. She prayed to God to take care of her son. She had only one option for her son whom she loved more than her own life which was to trust in God. It was in that operation room she looked her life from the end time. The surgery was successful, and she was fully recovered. She and I talk a lot about our sons, parenting, children's education, and dreams and fears for them. She always reminds me that we have only one option for our children which is to trust in God. When we live our lives from the perspective of the present life, we may think we have many options or choices to worry about. But when we live our lives from the perspective of the end time, we realize that we have only one option which is to trust in God.

In today's reading Jesus says, "I assure you that this generation will not pass away until all these things happen." All these things that Jesus mentions happen every day in our life and in the world, such as natural disasters, serious illness, losing loved ones, financial crisis, children's problems, losing jobs or losing money, marriage or relationship issues, societal disruptions, future of our nation and many more. We think and feel that is all about our chaotic, frustrating, and unpredictable life. We may become fearful and anxious, because we see our life in a dash. We worry about everything in that dash. But all these things should happen anyway no matter how much we worry about them. So, Jesus says, "Watch out and stay alert!" For my sister, the moment of 'watch out' happened in the operation room of hospital. How about you and I? When did that 'watch out' moment happen to you? After that moment how have you been living your present life? Are your hearts and lives changed?

To explain his teaching of 'watching out' Jesus gives a parable about how to live the present life. He says our present life is like a living in a household as servants or stewards where the master is on a trip. The servants do not know when the master would come home. So, the servants or stewards should live their present life from the perspective of the day when their master comes home. It can be today or tomorrow. It can be daytime or nighttime. So, watch out. But the servants do not have any reasons to be fearful for all happenings in the household because it is their master's household not their household. When the master comes, he will take care of it. The servants just need to be faithful to their jobs given by the master until his coming.

Several years ago, a man whose name was Nik Wallenda walked on a wire, a tightrope between two skyscrapers over Chicago River in Chicago downtown. How fearful it might be! The river flows under his feet. The cars are passing under his feet. The people who watch him were so anxious. All these things happen until he gets to the other side of the river. When I saw him walking on the tightrope, I thought that's how we live our present life. I believe our real life is not easier than walking on a tightrope. All dangerous things really happen to us or can happen any time to us and to our loved ones. It can be fearful. It can be dreadful. We can be anxious. We want to put security shields or blankets around us and our loved ones. Sometimes we just want to hide. But we are the servants or stewards of the household of God. We need to live the present life faithfully with trust in God. I hope is in God who holds the end time. I believe Nik Wallenda can walk on the tightrope between two destinations again and again not because he is a daredevil but because he is watching out and staying alert. In this Advent season let us not be fearful but watchful as Mary and Joseph, angels and shepherds, and wisemen did. Thanks be to God.