

The Hope within Anguish and Despair

Luke 21:25-38

When I was a boy, right after the Korean War, my family was so poor that what to eat and what to wear were the primary anxieties of my mother, who was responsible for preparing and providing these things for our family, particularly for all of us children. I don't remember ever receiving any gifts or presents from anyone as a child, including from my parents.

One day in March, when I was a boy, I marked a circle on the date of the nineteenth of March and wrote the word "Joy" next to that date on the family calendar. Nobody in my family, except my mother, knew what that meant. March nineteenth was my birthday, but my family was so poor that nobody in my family had ever had a birthday celebration since that would mean a special meal.

I didn't expect anything on my birthday, but just marked a circle on the calendar with a pencil and wrote "Joy" just for myself. But, on that day when I went to school and opened my lunch box at lunch time, I found a boiled egg inside my lunch, along with the ordinary, boring lunch-box meal. In those days, I had wished I could eat an egg a day. I thought that if I could eat an egg a day, I would be happy. An egg was not that expensive even then, but for my family, we could not afford to purchase eggs for all the family to eat. I didn't know how my mother managed to prepare an egg in my lunch box for me. A boiled egg meant a lot to me on that day.

There was a message in that egg secretly sent to me from my mom that day. The message was that my mom saw the mark on that calendar, and she remembered my birthday. She secretly prepared an egg for me, and only for me, and hid it in my lunch box outside the view of anyone else in the family. My mom was not a talkative person. She was rather quiet and very patient. I don't ever remember her saying the words, "I love you." Instead, she said, "Aren't you hungry? Are you cold, sick?" That lunch box I still remember.

Now, we don't have to make any mark on the date of Jesus' birth, since everyone knows it and expects to celebrate His birth. This season of waiting for the Jesus' birth is called the Advent season. Advent is the season of expectation.

We are the people of God, a people of expectation and of waiting. In this season, most kids wait for Christmas, and especially for Christmas gifts. In this season, we are busy preparing gifts for our family, children, grandchildren, and the friends who are important in our lives. But, the most precious gift of gifts, and expectation of expectations, is the Christ our Lord and His coming.

Advent proclaims the comings of the Christ whose birth we prepare to celebrate once again, and whose return in final victory we anticipate. Therefore, Advent has two meanings of Christ's coming: to recount, recall and reactivate the history of Christ who

came into human history 2000 years ago, and to expect Christ's second coming, at which time he promised to come again into human history.

The Apostle's creed is the affirmation of the Apostles' and the first century Christians' faith. In the Apostle's creed, the Christians expect that He will return for the judgment of the living and the dead. "He ascended into heaven, is seated at the right hand of the Father, and will come again to judge the living and the dead." Therefore, the Returning Christ is also one part of our Advent expectation and hope.

Today's scripture lesson, Luke 21:25-38, is a picture of the Signs of Christ's Second Coming in the last day of the world. This picture shows us men's hearts failing them for fear, and for looking after those things which are coming... for the powers of heaven shall be shaken. This expresses the terror which will seize the unconverted when these predicted calamities come to pass.

Last Wednesday I watched a movie called "2012," for the purpose of preparing this sermon. "2012" is a fictional account of the ending of the world. In the movie, the earth's core becomes heated up by intense solar flares, which result in great earthquakes, beginning in California and spreading all over the world. The crust of the earth shifts all over the planet, creating terrible Tsunamis in the oceans. Great Tsunamis, which swallow up a collapsed world, start from the Pacific Ocean and spread to even to Tibet and Mount Everest. It was a terrible scene when I watched the picture of the ending of the world this way. In the Bible, Jesus predicted that such a scene would be the beginning of the ending of the world.

The movie, "2012," reminded me today's scripture reading, as I reflected on the scene of the last day of the world. "There will be signs in the sun, moon, and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. Men will faint from terror, apprehensive of His coming in the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken. At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." (Luke 21:25-28)

In this world, good news for some is bad news for others, and bad news for some is good news for others. The news of the terrible ending of the world is bad news for the people who do not know about the return of Christ. But, this is good news and hope for those who believe in the second coming of Jesus our Lord. In the last day of the world there will be two kinds of people: those who will be in anguish and perplexity, and those who will lift up their heads because their redemption is drawing near.

It was winter one year when my family traveled to Seattle, and we were returning to Denver. I was the driver and we drove through Vail pass at about ten o'clock at night. Everybody in the car was fast asleep, and the winter sky was pitch dark, and the mountains were covered with snow. I suddenly found myself gazing up at the magnificent scenery upon the wide open sky, which was packed with stars and the Milky Way. It looked so close to heaven. I woke up Sun to tell her to look at the stars in the sky.

We all exclaimed amazement at the spectacular spectacle of the stars. It was so real that there is a world of the eternal, a world that we cannot imagine, a world beyond this world.

It is interesting that the same stars and the same Milky Way are always there, without changing, always the same beyond this world. But, we cannot see and recognize all that is out there during the day. The only time we can see clearly and recognize starkly what has always been there is in a time of darkness, when the sun is set and the horizon is completely hidden in the darkness.

While we live in the hope of this world, we cannot search the hope of the eternal. When this world is covered with darkness is the time to see clearly the hope of the eternal. It is then that the Lord's words of promise is may be heard clearly.

There is Jesus' famous Parable of the Ten Virgins in the Bible. There were ten virgins who expected to meet the bridegroom. It became night and they heard that any minute that night, the bridegroom might come. Five of them were foolish and five were wise. The five foolish ones took theirs lamps but didn't take any extra oil to make sure they could light their lamps when the time came. They knew that oil for the lamp was needed, but they put off the necessary preparations to greet the bridegroom. The wise, however, took oil in jars, along with their lamps.

The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep. At midnight the cry rang out: "Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!" Come out to meet him!" Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish ones asked the wise, "Please share with us some of your oil; our lamps are going out."

"No," the wise ones replied. "There may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves." But, the time was too late. While they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. Then, the door was shut.

There are two kinds of people in the last days of the world. One kind will enter into the banquet of the Lord. The other will be expelled out from the banquet because they didn't prepare the clothes of faith. Their problem is that they didn't use their time to prepare for the coming Lord. We don't know when the time will be, but continuing the preparation is the wise habit.

I have known a medical doctor whose wife was one of my previous church members. This doctor had to have colon surgery one time. Do you know who the worst patient for the doctor is? The doctor who becomes a patient is the worst patient for a doctor. This patient didn't listen to what his doctor said because he thought he already knew everything that his doctor was saying. I visited this patient-doctor while he was in recovery room from surgery. Since he didn't listen to the surgeon's instructions, he had more pain than other patients. And he had to call the surgeon, his friend.

He told me his story. He asked his friend, “Why has the pain not gone away yet?” The friend doctor, who was a Christian, answered him, “The sun cannot set until the time of sunset, even if you cry out, “You, sun, should set at once!” God’s time is different from the time on your watch

Advent is the time of preparing for the coming Christ. Isaiah suggested how we should prepare for the coming Christ.

A voice of one calling out in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.” (Isaiah 40:3-5)

The King to come is looking for the wounded hearts among the people who seek the justice and righteous of the kingdom of God. Make your hearts like a way paved, straightened, leveled and plain for the King who rules our hearts and lives.

We are living in between the time of Christ who came, was risen and raised up, and the time in which Christ is expected to come in final victory. In between the times we also celebrate, once again, He who comes to us continually in Word and Spirit. The spirit and blessing of the final victory of Jesus may come into your life and fill your hearts in preparing for Christ.

The now, the time for preparing for our King, is the eternal now. You are living in the eternal now, which belongs to heaven when your hope is hoped for in the eternal world. The darkness of anguish and despair in daily life may just be our time of hope, a time when we can see the stars of promise of the eternal God. Don’t be anxious about the coming end of the world and life in this world, which is fleeting and soon to be destroyed, but prepare for the promise of the eternal King who will come and rule our lives—Emmanuel, God with Us. There is hope that can only be found in our anguish and despair, only seen in the darkness.