

Walk to Emmaus

Luke 24:13-35

The Age of Uncertainty

During this Covid-19 pandemic, I often feel that I live in surreal times. Right before the stay-at-home order was issued, Juhee and I watched a movie, “Contagion.” I enjoyed the movie but I don’t recommend you to watch this kind of virus pandemic movie before an actual pandemic hits our society. It’s not helpful for your mental health.

Panic-buying, a rapid spread of the virus, stay-at-home orders, conspiracy theories, thousands of body bags... what happened in the movie has become real. Our medical system has been overwhelmed by Covid-19. Our economy has stopped.

We have been practicing social distancing for more than a month, but we do not really feel any big changes when we hear the governor’s daily reports or president’s daily briefings. We are tired of hearing statistics and numbers. We are sick of national leaders politicizing this pandemic for their own political benefit. Right?

The hardest part of the Covid-19 pandemic is that no one really has THE answer. How long will this situation continue? Is it safe to go to the grocery store? When will my life get back to normal? Dr. Anthony Fauci said, 'You don't make the timeline. The virus makes the timeline.' It means no one knows when everything will get back to normal. No one knows the best way to handle this crisis. It’s all a prediction-game at best. Everything is uncertain. Until a Covid-19 vaccine is found, we have to go through uncertain times. This uncertainty makes us anxious and insecure. As Christians, how should we walk through this time of uncertainty? Is there hope glimmering even in this darkest time?

Walking through uncertain time

In today’s scripture, we meet two disciples who are walking through a difficult and very uncertain time as we do today. The Bible does not tell us about why these two disciples walked to Emmaus but we can guess that they might be fleeing from impending persecution and be on their way back to their hometown.

Their teacher, Jesus, had been crucified and they saw him die a few days earlier. Jesus was everything for them. His teaching was so powerful and moving that they hoped that he was the one who would redeem Israel. They were able to dream a new future, a bright future of their nation.

But their beloved teacher was killed three days ago and now, the Jews might be looking for their next prey. During the holy festival of Passover, Jews postponed punishments and executions. But the festival had come to an end and the only shield that could protect Jesus’ disciples were now gone. The disciples were afraid for their lives and their uncertain future. They didn’t know what’s going to happen to them if they stayed in Jerusalem. So they hurried their way out of the city even though they heard from some women that Jesus was alive.

With their shattered hopes and dreams, they fled from the past, but they could not escape the anxiety and fear of uncertainty. They walked to Emmaus with heavy steps, but they didn’t really know where to go from there. They were completely lost. Just like us, they didn’t know what to do and were afraid of the uncertain future that lay ahead of them.

Crossing the desert of change

You've probably heard the phrase: "The only thing certain in life is uncertainty. And knowing how to live with insecurity is the only security." But for many of us, uncertainty is uncomfortable. Very uncomfortable. The stock market surely does not like uncertainty. In fact, no one likes uncertainty. Right? But uncertainty and insecurity are part of life.

Many sages knew this nature of life so they have said 'life is a journey through the desert.' Sometimes, we reach an oasis of happiness and sip the sweet nectar of life. But sometimes, we find ourselves standing in the middle of a sandstorm. When we face the storm, there is nothing we can do about it but wait until it passes. Furthermore, the storm tends to completely change the landscape where we stand and we don't know where we are and where to go. Many of us may feel this way now, standing in the perfect sandstorm that is changing the world we knew and we still don't know what the new normal will look like after this storm passes. What should we do? How can we wisely cross this desert of life?

First, we need to be still, not panic. As the Psalmist sings, "Be still, and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10), we need to be still and know that our God is God. We tend to think that "we can do anything if we work hard. We can achieve anything if you work hard enough to get it." This is the core belief of the American Dream. And in our dream, we try to be God of our own tiny world, who controls and secures our lives. We have gradually forgotten who God is. Suddenly, the storm called Covid-19 has shattered our false dreams and we suddenly realize that our world is shaking. But my friends, don't panic but be still and see the One who holds the future. Calm your frightened mind through prayer and wait and be still instead of letting your fear controls you.

In his book, "Shifting Sands," Steve Donahue says, life is like crossing the desert of change. Because the landscape of the desert keeps changing, to cross the desert, we need to follow a compass, not a map. This is right advice. In the desert, we need to follow the compass rather than merely following the old map we are familiar with.

When there was no compass available, the ancient camel caravans crossed the great dunes of the Sahara Desert by watching the stars in the sky. The sky was their compass. When they didn't know where to go, they look up at the sky, not down.

I believe we also need to remember this wisdom. When we are lost and don't know where to go in the deserts of life, like today, we need to look up, not look down or around. Lift up your eyes on high, and see the one who creates the whole world. Heads up to God's presence and listening for His guidance. When we kneel before God to pray... when we bow our head, close our eyes and fold our hands to pray, our spirits are actually looking up to heaven and the presence of God. I believe, this is the time to humbly bow down our heads and kneel before God and pray. Through prayer and deep meditation on the Bible, we may be able to see a bright star that guides us where to go in the dark night.

Follow the star, not an Easy path!

Unlike a GPS, the compass or pointer star don't tell us the detailed path to go. They only indicate the right direction to go and it's our job to carefully discern what to do and which ways we will take to move forward. Jesus Christ is the star who shows us the right direction for our lives.

When a sandstorm changes the landscape of the desert, it may create a huge sand dune, blocking our way toward our destination. People may want to find an easy way and divert from the right path to a seemingly easy path forward. Unfortunately, this is what is happening in our society today.

When a disaster like coronavirus strikes, people tend to become more tribalistic and hostile toward other groups. We want to protect our family, our friends, our people, and our country. This is why the coronavirus outbreak drives xenophobia and racism in the United States. To maintain the false sense of unity and security, people tend to blame out-groups or racial and ethnic minorities for the disaster. Politicians try to scapegoat immigrants for their own political benefit.

As an Asian-immigrant, I have felt increasing hostility toward immigrants since the coronavirus outbreak. On Monday night, President Trump tweeted, “In light of the attack from the Invisible Enemy, as well as the need to protect the jobs of our GREAT American Citizens, I will be signing an Executive Order to temporarily suspend immigration into the United States!” and he signed it on Wednesday. Personally, I don’t really understand how the Covid-19 relates to immigration. In fact, I am not an American citizen. Does that mean that I am a possible ally with the invisible enemy? Or am I considered to be a potential enemy? Or does it mean that I am threatening the jobs of Great Americans? For the first time, I clicked on the President’s tweet account and read comments. So many comments were full of anger and hatred toward immigrants like me. Reading those comments really hurt. What made me really depressed and sad were comments like, “God bless America!” Will God bless America if America shuts its doors to and refuses to provide food and the shelters to the poor and the oppressed? Will God bless America if it oppresses immigrants and does not welcome strangers in the name of national security? Maybe not.

This new circumstance has increased the pain, uncertainty and insecurity of many Asian immigrants and ethnic minorities. Blaming others for the crisis is an easy path. Scapegoating vulnerable immigrants in order to create a false sense of security and unity is an easy path. But they are not a right path for Christians to follow. It is not the path Jesus showed us. In Matthew 25, Jesus said, ‘I’m telling the solemn truth: Whenever you did one of these things to someone overlooked or ignored, that was me—you did it to me.’ (v. 40)

In fact, the two disciples in today’s scripture were able to find a right direction for their lives in a time of uncertainty when they invited a stranger into their life. On the road to Emmaus, Jesus came near and walked with them. Jesus appeared to be a complete stranger to the disciples. But the disciples said, “stay with us” and invited him into their place and to their table. And “Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it and gave it to them. Then, their eyes were opened, and they recognized him!” The disciples’ hospitality toward a stranger was the moment of revelation. When they opened their ears to the voice of a stranger and accepted him into their fellowship, they were able to find a bright pointing star that told them where to go and the two disciples returned to Jerusalem, their mission site.

I know many of you are anxious because we don’t know what lies ahead of us. We are afraid of an uncertain future and a completely new reality we are going to face after this covid-19 situation. If you don’t know what to do, my friends, be still and lift up your eyes on high! Don’t look down or look around to find your way forward. Look up at the sky and see Jesus, who is the compass and a bright pointer star that shows us a right direction to follow.

Don’t be enticed by an easy path, a path of hatred and a false sense of security, but follow the right path. Courageously move your steps in the way of salvation even though it looks like a narrow way. As Christ walked with the two disciples, our Lord will continue to walk with us and guide our steps.

May God bless you with every step you take and give you courage that we may get through this uncertain time, unafraid but with hope and love. Amen.