

## Faith in the Face of Death

Sermon for Eternity Sunday

Sermon Text: Mark 13:28-37



*“From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near. <sup>29</sup> So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. <sup>30</sup> Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. <sup>31</sup> Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. <sup>32</sup> But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. <sup>33</sup> Be on guard, keep awake. For you do not know when the time will come. <sup>34</sup> It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to stay awake. <sup>35</sup> Therefore stay awake – for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning – <sup>36</sup> lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. <sup>37</sup> And what I say to you I say to all: Stay awake.”*

“I don’t have eyes in the back of my head!” the mother must tell her son after he complains about his mother’s slight inattention. Being able to see all around or to look around the corner would be something, wouldn’t it? But now we have to live with an annoyingly short view. Just like a cat must blindly feel around in a mouse hole, many things remain hidden to us. For example, there are more living things that we can’t see than living things that we can see, such as the little monster known as the Corona virus which kept our whole world for years in fear and trembling. And then there is still the greater universe that is unknown to us and unexplored. And so we must say together with the songwriter, Mattias Claudius: *So there are some things that we confidently laugh at because our eyes do not see them!* And yet we want to see or understand more. The unknown future is especially fascinating to us. We would like to know what will happen in the future. There are some people that claim that they can predict everything in the future. And then they scare us with a bleak future. But we are blind and unknowing regarding what comes after life. We don’t know what happens after death. No one can explain death to us from their own experience and above all, report from eternity on how and what happens after death. Yet we want to think about eternal life today. That’s why this Sunday is called Eternity Sunday. But we don’t just want to think about eternity, but also want to think about death which looms large and powerful in the midst of our life. That’s why we pray along with Psalm 90:12: *So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.*

In our Sermon text today, Jesus wants to encourage us to think about eternal life. Yes, He doesn’t just want to encourage us: He even commands it. Jesus urges us regularly to be watchful because we don’t know the day or hour. In fact, it is an essential part of Christianity that we don’t make ourselves at home in this world, but to wait with alert minds for what is to come. In our text today, Jesus compares everything with something from nature. In very clear and explicit words, He explains to us: In nature, we can perceive exactly when day and night, summer and winter occur and prepare ourselves accordingly. Just like one can observe the fig tree. When it’s green and tender, we know that summer is approaching, and we will soon be able to live from its fruits. Our whole Christian life is like the fig tree. We live in the twilight time between sunrise and a new day, we live in the time between winter and summer. We can already see and feel how things are changing and therefore we know that a new future and a new time will begin. We can even say that our faith lives from what is to come. If our faith were only what we could see here on earth, we would be “of all people most to be pitied,” as the apostle Paul says. One can even say that because we know what is to come in the future, our faith only makes sense at this time in the here and now. So faith is firmly anchored in the world to come and not in this world. Yet faith gives us support in this life. Faith expects something from God that is not now and that’s why even the worst situation can’t make us sad. That’s why faith and hope are so often interchanged in the Bible as if they were brother and sister. In faith, I already view the future as reality and adjust my life accordingly. Jesus even encourages us to do this and closes His short speech with the order: Stay awake! We should be vigilant so that we don’t lose sight of

the future that lies ahead of us. And with that, Jesus places the shocking possibility before us that we could sleep through the coming of eternity. It could be that we live as if there were only this world. What if we only had this world? What if we only had this life and the journey didn't continue at all after that?

I'll explain what this can mean with a little example: Not too long ago, I was able to have a funeral for my father. It was a bit of a difficult situation because my father died right in the middle of the Covid pandemic and lived in South Africa. Which meant that my brother and I couldn't bury our father for two years. As a result, our father's ashes were located on a family member's shelf between Martin Luther's works for two years. One day before his funeral, we picked up my father there and slept with him for a night at a guest house similarly to what we would have done if we were there for a visit, only everything was different because he was no longer the same. Instead, he was in a polished box. Everything that he was before was now just a pile of ashes. And yet we believe that the promise of eternal life God gives us doesn't go away even when there is nothing left of us. God's promise has power, meaning, and effectiveness, even when there is nothing left but a pile of ashes. The same God who made us and leads our lives through many highs and lows, watches over us, even when we are in a box. Of course, death is and remains a horrible separation. Of course, it feels like death has the last word over our lives. Of course, it appears to us as if there is nothing after death. But that is only how it appears to our eyes. Just like we can't grasp many other things with our eyes and comprehend them with our minds, we also can't understand death. You need faith to look past this boundary of death. And you need God to see eternal life through death. The Christian faith doesn't try to describe what happens after death. Everything is summed up in Jesus Christ who is our connection to God. Faith knows only about this connection; it doesn't require more. Knowledge about this connection to God now defines our entire life here and now.

You could imagine it like a person who lives in Iran now and finds out from the German embassy in Tehran that he received a passport for Germany. That little booklet with his picture inside is not just some paper for this person but a completely new life. That means that this person will then research everything that is important in his new home. He will want to find out what language is spoken in Germany and will perhaps already start learning German. Similarly, he will also pack the proper clothing and books to read about his new country. All because he knows due to this passport that his future will now be in that new country. Such a person does all this even if he still lives with both feet in Iran and has never seen Germany before. So, he lives in one country, but he is already looking completely towards the future in the new country. So it is with us as Christians. We have also received a passport. The words of Jesus Christ are our passport because He tells us: Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away. Jesus' words that were spoken over my father at his baptism also apply even when nothing is left of him but ashes and he is in a box. Jesus' words are also the passport that He gives to us here and now and these words now define us. Baptism is not just a piece of paper, it means something. It means that my future is in heaven with God. And that's why I will live my life in such a way here in this world so that I can prepare for heaven with God. Whoever aligns himself with heaven is alive even when he dies. The Italian composer, Luigi Nono, wrote his works about the many evil things in the world. He commented on topics such as intolerance, Hiroshima, and civil wars with his art. He manages to see beyond the catastrophes to the light. This is how he writes about life and death:

*Alive is he who awaits the light in the days of the black storm  
Who chooses the quieter songs without shouting and gunshots  
Turns to the autumn and does not stop loving.*

Yes, and I can add to that: Don't stop living even if only ashes remain. Amen.