

God is Still Nearby Even in the Midst of Chaos!

Sermon for the 1st Sunday in Lent

Sermon Text: 2 Corinthians 6:1-10



Working together with Him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain. ² For He says, "In a favorable time I listened to you, and in a day of salvation I have helped you." Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation. ³ We put no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, ⁴ but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, ⁵ beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; ⁶ by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love; ⁷ by truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; ⁸ through honor and dishonor, through slander and praise. We are treated as imposters, and yet are true; ⁹ as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; ¹⁰ as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything.

As I was walking in the park, I noticed a person who had spread a huge poster before themselves on the grass. On the poster were instructions for meditation that they practiced with great devotion and concentration. The poster had a huge label that was visible to everyone. With big block letters, the poster said: "TO THE DIVINE ME." I thought that such a person must certainly have a great longing. And isn't that what we all have in this time of impending war? A longing for God! And a longing for peace! On that same day, I had a conversation with a friend from Leipzig and as is often the case these last few days, we soon got to the topic of Ukraine. I had said to my friend, "We are looking directly into the pit of hell!" And my friend answered: "And behind it is the decision of a single man who, out of complete thirst for power, keeps the whole world in check." My Leipzig friend further asked: "Why does God do nothing?" The two experiences I had last week summarize well how we humans now think and feel. On the one side is terror and fear. On the other side is yearning and longing for God and peace. And that is precisely the question that Paul dealt with when he wrote the letter to the Corinthians. Even back in those days, there was a lot of evil. Putin isn't the first to discover evil. No, evil was here long before Putin and it isn't only seen in the large world events. Each of us also knows evil in our own lives. The question is how does one deal with it? The person that I had seen in the park obviously felt that there

was something good or divine to be found deep within a person. And that's why this person tried so hard. Perhaps this person even thought that they could escape from the reality of this evil world. This opinion is actually not that far removed from that of the Corinthians to whom Paul wrote these letters. They also thought that the divine is something they must find within themselves. For these people it was clear that evil isn't part of their lives but only something in the world. And to the extent that one separates oneself from these evil influences or practices of the divine, one could achieve the goal of finding God in this life. What the Corinthians did is actually the plan of every single religion in the world. According to some religions, you must practice meditation or obey certain laws to obtain the divine. Paul contradicts the Corinthians and says something completely different than all the religions of the world. The divine is not something natural that can or must be developed or practiced in man. No, not at all! Something else has to happen that is neither connected to human nature nor can it be connected to human actions. God Himself must be active – only God can bring this change about in our lives. The divine is not a human ability. God Himself must start something new within us. And this work of God, that He creates within us, Paul calls it **Grace**. In all his letters, it's always only about this one word – Grace. Everything that we do is law and leads us into the pit. But it is God who creates something new in us. And that is called **Grace**. At this point, Paul said nothing different than what Jesus Himself said. When Jesus spoke with the pharisee, Nicodemus, He said to him: We must be born again. Just as a child can't give birth to itself but is brought into the world by the mother and father, the same is true when people become Christians. God Himself makes us new and it isn't that we must discover or create the divine inside ourselves. Just as a child can't give birth to itself, neither can a Christian make himself a Christian. But we know that birth is connected with pain and separation. When a child comes into the world, it is very traumatic for the mother and child. Both are in fact forcibly separated! The child is pulled out from the safety of the womb. Instead of blissfully floating in the amniotic fluid, it is pulled out and lands in this hard world. Furthermore, the baby's source of nutrition, the umbilical cord is cut with a knife. A birth is actually a horrible separation! And that's why newborns cry so loudly when they are born. Birth has to do with separation! And our relationship with God too! We sense that we are separated from God. We see it all over the world. And it hurts! That's why we wail so loudly. But with the birth of a child, something new materializes after the birth. The baby feels safe in the arms of its mother. The baby feels warmth and love. It learns very quickly that it belongs to its mother and regularly looks for this new experience of closeness. Somehow, a magical connection exists between mother and child. This connection is real. One could almost think that a cable connects the two. And that connection is also the foundation of the first communication, so the first smiles and the first words come out of the child's mouth.

Jesus compared birth with our Christian life. Through this, He showed that our relationship to God also needs this real and sure foundation of new birth. We can't create or train up the divine in ourselves. We need a foundation, and this foundation is that God makes us new! We don't make ourselves new. With the newborn baby, the connection to the parents is clear. Parents and child know: "That is my flesh and blood. We belong together!" And the baby that just went through the traumatic experience of birth, naturally throws itself into its mother's arms. Mother and child instinctively know that they belong together. It is naturally the same with us Christians. We sense the separation between us and God. Contrary to the opinion of the Corinthians, we are not yet in heaven. In many places we sense the separation between us and God. Even in our own lives, we experience many terrible things. And we don't even know what it means to be reborn through God. But just like newborns, we search for God because we belong to Him. In his letter, Paul describes how God gave us the Holy Spirit who lives in us.

That doesn't mean that right after baptism, we will be directly beamed up to God and become perfect. No, we remain in this world. But the Holy Spirit shows us that we belong to God and also gives us the desire to see God. The Holy Spirit, who works within us, shows us that the world, as we know it, is not perfect. And precisely in these terrible times of war that we see that the world is not how God wants it to be. But at the same time, He shows us that our goal and our fate is in God. And so Paul impressively describes all the painful situations and relates this whole experience to God.

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We are actually separated from God – we fell into sin and must die. We see countless examples of this separation from God in our lives. But if we are baptized, we have put on Jesus. Then God says: “That is My flesh and blood! We belong together!” And the Holy Spirit in us says or cries out loudly: Abba, Father! Amen.