

True Comfort versus False Comfort

Sermon for the 3rd Sunday of Advent

Sermon Text: Isaiah 40:1-11



Comfort, comfort My people, says your God. ² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. ³ A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. ⁴ Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. ⁵ And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken." ⁶ A voice says, "Cry!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. ⁷ The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the Lord blows on it; surely the people are grass. ⁸ The grass withers, the flower fades, but the Word of our God will stand forever. ⁹ Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news; lift it up, fear not; say to the cities of Judah, "Behold your God!" ¹⁰ Behold, the Lord God comes with might, and His arm rules for Him; behold, His reward is with Him, and His recompense before Him. ¹¹ He will tend His flock like a shepherd; He will gather the lambs in His arms; He will carry them in His bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.

The 7-year-old Bari was lost. He tried to flee the poverty and war in Afghanistan with his 17-year-old brother. But his brother was caught by the police and now Bari was wandering around with a group of people he had never seen before. He saw countries and heard languages he knew nothing about. Bari was terribly lost and missed his mother. In the evenings, he took the sleeves of the sweater he had gotten as a goodbye gift from his mother and sucked on them. The sweater gave him a little bit of comfort. Yet his sleep was often filled with many tears. Just like the lost Bari, the whole nation of Israel was also lost. And not only the people of Israel, the entire Bible is a story about people who are on the run. And the question that comes up is this: "Aren't we all like lost wanderers? Don't we all need comfort like Bari? Bari sucked on the sweater from his mother. For him, this was an empty consolation, not comfort! Just as Bari needs not only his mother's sweater but his mother herself, we need true comfort! But let's first look to the story in the Bible. There, the topic of escape and being lost is repeated again and again. The words that we hear today from the prophet Isaiah, were written in a similar situation. The people of Israel were once again deported. The Temple, the place where God's presence was, was reduced to rubble. Now, the Israelites had to live in Babylon. Babylon was a gentile city and its great patron god was Marduk. The people even had to sacrifice their children to appease this god and everything else was under his cruel governance too. Meanwhile, the true God remained silent. At that time, it was clear for every Israelite to see that the evil powers had triumphed over God and His righteousness. And many said: if even God can't help, who can? The Israelites were lost. They were without salvation and with no hope of any success. They had to follow the trail of blood from the false god, Marduk.

We can well imagine this despondency of the Israelites. Even Iran had to suffer 43 years under a religious regime. The regime permeates everything: religion, culture, education, the economy. It is like a cancer and has become so deeply ingrained in Iran that it is not easy to get away from it again, in any case, not without a very, very high death toll. Trust had been lost, both among the people of Iran and the Israelites under the violent idol, Marduk. Trust in authorities, trust in the government, trust in parents... everything is gone. Not even trust in God was left over. Yes, trust is always the first casualty lost when people are lost. For Bari, the Afghan boy, as well as for the Israelites and also the many Iranians who demonstrate on the streets of Iran and elsewhere, they all have one thing in common. They have lost trust. And yet we need trust so badly and ask ourselves the question: what even is trust and how can we win back trust? Even though people often talk about self-trust, it doesn't actually exist. Trust is always related to a person who stands opposite me – trust cannot exist on its own, trust cannot materialize from

people by itself. It needs a counterpart. But what if this counterpart is not there or isn't trustworthy? A child has a natural trust in his parents. But what if these parents, like in Bari's situation, are no longer there? The state is also an authority that is trusted. People think that the state has the responsibility to care for its people. But what if the state does the exact opposite and murders its people? Then people can no longer trust the state because the state embarked on a downward spiral of bloodshed where all must eventually become victims. However, what can be observed in the people of Israel and in Iran, can be seen throughout the world – namely this: people have lost faith. Even in the church there is sometimes strife and division which violates trust. And even worse, people also lose faith in God and wonder: "Is God still there? Can He still do anything?"

In our text today, we get a glimpse into heaven and we see a God who is not silent. God actually commands from heaven: "Comfort, comfort My people!" And the question is: how does God comfort us? It becomes clear that comfort must always have a reason. Bari's sweater that he put in his mouth every night was not really a comfort. It was just a substitute for the real thing because the sweater could never replace his mother. And unfortunately, I observe that people always try to give others reassurances that can't help them or are outright lies. On what basis and with what evidence can we say that God truly comforts and doesn't just offer empty comfort? And how can we regain our trust? We already notice that trust is closely related to faith. One can actually even say that trust is another word for faith. But the word faith has something more substantial! In the Old Testament, the word for faith is like something that is firmly cemented and so solid that a house can be built upon it. So, faith is not just a feeling, it is a strong foundation on which one's entire life can be built. And that's why faith is such an important word, it even connects us with God. We need this faith especially when we can't see God. When Adam and Eve were still in paradise, they didn't need to believe because they could see God face to face! But we can't see God face to face. We are separated from God. And that's why we so urgently need faith! But it's at this exact point of faith that things become difficult for us because we notice that we can't believe. We also can't create faith. Unfortunately, we try to create faith again and again, and fail! What comes from this is not faith, but false comfort and even lies. For example, many people make up laws and think that this is the way to find God. For others, faith has become like a kind of marketplace of possibilities. This means that people only let God say what they themselves think is right or is to their own selfish advantage. The motto appears to be: as long as it feels good. But that's not faith. That is even worse than false comfort. It is a lie and is just a type of tool to influence people. This is not what Isaiah is talking about. God says that all flesh will pass away like the grass in the field. But God's Word remains forever. And that's why God commands Isaiah that he should only speak God's Word and nothing else. It's not deceptive human feelings, not manipulation! And above all, it's not false comfort! Only on God's Word can you build your life. What's amazing is that God's Word comes right where we think faith can't exist – in places that are impassable, places where there are only stones and boulders and desert. He speaks precisely from these places where we can't believe or where we can't see God. Isaiah speaks of this very forsakenness that we know so well, actually, precisely from the places where we think that God has forgotten us and we can't believe in Him... *A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. ⁴Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. ⁵And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together..."* Later, John the Baptist proclaimed these very words. And what he meant by them, he clearly painted before the eyes of his countrymen. The reason why we are so terribly lost is because we are sinful. The reason why we wander around so senselessly and aimlessly is because we are separated from God! And we can't do anything about it. God Himself must make the way clear. And John shows us what that means. He proclaims to us: "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29) Amen.