

## Sermon for Lätare Sunday

### Isaiah 66:10-14

*“<sup>10</sup>Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad for her, all you who love her; rejoice with her in joy, all you who mourn over her; <sup>11</sup>that you may nurse and be satisfied from her consoling breast; that you may drink deeply with delight from her glorious abundance.” <sup>12</sup>For thus says the Lord: “Behold, I will extend peace to her like a river, and the glory of the nations like an overflowing stream; and you shall nurse, you shall be carried upon her hip, and bounced upon her knees. <sup>13</sup>As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem. <sup>14</sup>You shall see, and your heart shall rejoice; your bones shall flourish like the grass; and the hand of the Lord shall be known to his servants, and he shall show his indignation against his enemies.”*

God is usually addressed as father. We know this from the Lord’s Prayer: “Our Father!” It is also found in the parable of the prodigal son, where the father embraces his lost son. Today, in Isaiah, we encounter a different image: an image of God as a mother holding us to her breast. Anyone who has ever watched a child nurse from its mother can understand this image. Anyone who has observed this knows exactly what Isaiah is talking about when he writes, “...like a child enjoying its mother’s breast.” The child nursing at its mother’s breast is an image of unconditional love, joy, trust, and last but not least, enjoyment! The child has no doubt or concern as it nurses from its mother, taking the whole of her into its mouth with great love and trust. If you observe the child’s breathing, you can see it breathing from the deepest part of its lungs as its belly rises and falls in a regular rhythm. The child is deeply relaxed while in this place!

How wonderful it is that God uses this image to describe how He holds us in His arms. We need do nothing more than this: place ourselves in God’s arms with complete trust and allow Him to nourish us. Looking deep into His eyes and experiencing with our whole being how His power flows into us, and how all malice, all fear, and all doubt disappear. What an image and how fitting it is in these times! Today God invites us to take a deep breath and then to ask three fundamental questions: Where am I right now? Who am I? And where am I going?

When it comes to the questions of “where am I right now,” we must inevitably face the harsh reality of our world and not ignore the major problems. For the Israelites who heard these words for the first time, the harsh reality was the ruins of Jerusalem. The people of Israel firmly believed that God would dwell in the temple in Jerusalem, but now the temple lay in ruins. There was no trace of God to be seen.

The situation of the Israelites in front of the destroyed temple is one of total abandonment by God. This situation is very similar to the situation of our world today. The ruins of destroyed cities, even entire countries which have been destroyed, are increasing daily. The world has been thrown into turmoil and many wonder how long it will be before this destruction reaches us too. But in reality, this destruction has long since reached us. People fleeing war, hunger, and persecution can be found *everywhere* today. They all testify to us that the world is an extremely unsafe place. In this situation, people find it difficult to believe in God, let alone a God of comfort who takes us in His arms and comforts us like a mother. People who have distanced themselves from God and no longer believe in Him still seek evidence of His love but cannot find it.

Sometimes even we as Christian don’t really know how to deal with all the suffering and what answers there are to the ever-spreading unbelief. We see so little of God’s glory, love, and comfort in our lives. That’s why I sense a restlessness among us Christians. We are not unaffected by the bad

news stories in the world. Sometimes we follow one opinion or the other and cannot be satisfied with God's Word. Sometimes we worry whether we have done enough, prayed enough, or worked hard enough for God. Trust and faith have truly been lost to us. Even we Christians sometimes live as if God did not exist. We worry (greatly) about the many wars. This creates a kind of panic. We rush from one solution to the next, from one crisis to the next. Yet every difficulty is overtaken by a new one.

In this short text from Isaiah, the word "comfort" appears frequently. This word is to be understood quite differently from the idea of "superficial consolation." When we console someone without meaning it, we try to find superficial words that might put all the suffering into perspective. When we try to console ourselves with superficial reasoning, we blindly hope that things might get better in the future. Comfort in Isaiah is something else. There, a change takes place within us, not necessarily within the situation. We don't need superficial consolation; we need a spiritual transformation amid crises.

This transformation stems from the fact that we know who we are. A child who has scraped its knee runs into its mother's arms. The child knows that it is just that – a child – and knows its mother. The knee still hurts and may even be bleeding, but the child feels safe in its mother's arms and finds itself in a completely different situation where its suffering is concerned. That is precisely why it is important to answer the question "Who am I?" by fleeing into God's arms and hearing the answer: I am His child. Everything begins with God. God made us and has firmly integrated each of us into His plan. God even knows our every thought. Even more importantly, God *loves* us! God loves us even more than a mother can love her child, the child who is so closely connected to her body as it nurses.

Dear congregation, I believe that there is much work and many challenges ahead of us as people and as a church. We cannot shy away from these great challenges or pretend they do not exist. Yet, before we even begin to act or think, it is important that we know who we are. We can only know this when we are in God's arms!

The word "joy" appears just as often as the word "comfort" in these verses. There is an interesting phrase here as well: "We will rejoice in God and rejoice in Jerusalem." Rejoicing in God and rejoicing in Jerusalem come together here. Jerusalem refers to the community of God. In Isaiah too, the community of God is closely associated with God Himself – just as in the New Testament the church is seen as the body of Christ. In Isaiah, God not only gives us a clear indication of who we are as God's children but also shows us where we can find this identity: God has described these holy places in detail so that we know where to find them. They are in the Church, in God's Word, in the reception of Holy Communion, and in Baptism. In these places, we nurse like children and receive nourishment from the Father.

That brings us to the third question: Where should we go from here? On the one hand, we have these holy places where we are in God's arms and experience His love. On the other hand, there is this appalling distance from God everywhere in our world. Where should the path lead us as Christians in this world? I would like to return once more to the situation of the Israelites in Jerusalem. When the Israelites saw the ruins of God's house, hope seemed to be at an end for them. God was no longer there! That was the human conclusion. But then, completely contrary and in contradiction to all experience came these wonderful words from Isaiah: the words about a child in God's arms, the words that God has never forgotten His children and never will. The image was meant to give courage. The Israelites were to see a difference between what is now and what could or should be. They were to use eyes of faith to see what God would do in the future. They were to recognize their own powerlessness but also recognize that everything is possible for God.

All of this culminates in the sentence written by Isaiah: “Then the hand of the Lord will be known.” When the Bible speaks of the hand of God, it means that God is omnipresent. Psalm 139:9-10, for example, reads, “If I...dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me.”

When we confess in the creed that Jesus sits at the right hand of God, it means that Jesus is in the immediate presence of God. His hand reaches into our world. It is God who made us with His mighty hand. It is God who holds His hand over us to this day. That is the only reason our world has not yet sunk into chaos entirely. It is God’s hand alone that will pull us out of this world and our many troubles. God stretched His hand to the Israelites back then. His hand was visible amid the destruction. This hand touched people’s hearts and showed them who they were and where the path would lead. It was a glimpse of the future. He did not show them the entire movie, but only a “trailer” to tell the people, “This is what it will be like! I will be as close to you as a mother holding a child to her breast.”

This is exactly how God speaks to us today. God usually reaches out His hand where we least expect it. God reaches out His hand and allows it to be nailed to the cross. For Israelites at that time, it was unthinkable that God would become human. Even less believable was that this hand of God would be nailed powerlessly to the cross. For us, this is just as unbelievable. Yet that’s how God’s love is: unthinkable and unimaginable! Even so, through this hand on the cross we feel love that is warm and alive, and eyes that only want to give endlessly, seeking out the deepest point of human misery. All so that God can be close to us again.

When I see this love, I realize that God’s love is truly boundless. I may drink of it endlessly! I may live—live in His arms and in His hand—even today when I am painfully aware of my limitations.

Amen.