

After the Sermon Hymn: *Stepping down to the congregation:*

Ezek 33: 8-14 **“So you, mortal, I have made a sentinel”**

(09/04/2011)

- by Rev. Peter Dennebaum -

Going down the stairs.... / If less than 33 parishioners then gathering everybody in the choir stalls

God's peace with you!

It is Labor Day Weekend. The people who proposed today's texts had probably something in mind, to pick these readings for today.

Labor Day has become the last call to the beaches. With this weekend the official Beach season comes to an end. After this Sunday we count down to Thanksgiving in 10 weeks and 4 days. Then we have Black Friday and the Advents Season begins.

Labor Day was not always so depoliticized as it is today. In the US the first Labor Day was in 1882 – 129 years ago. Its origin was the worldwide movement for an 8-hours workday.

In May 1882 the Central Labor Union had the idea for a “Monster Labor Festival”. A month later 20.000 invitations were sent out. The idea was that all workers should have the possibility to demonstrate for their rights and celebrate the solidarity with each other in community. On September 5th the demonstration took place in New York City ... 10–20.000 followed the call and it is reported that up to 50.000 people participated in the picnic afterwards in Elm Park - a real festival.

Seven years later Labor Day was celebrated already in 400 cities all over the country.

Labor Day was and is still the result of thousands of hard working people, who had come together in unions and socialistic parties all over the world to humanize the inhuman working conditions of millions. The line can be drawn from the early socialist and social reformer Robert Owen in Great Britain in the early 18 hundreds to the Labor movement in the whole world. Within 50 years a consciousness was developed, which was finally able to change the working conditions for many and set new standards, we still benefit from in our days; We wouldn't be able to enjoy days off at the beach without the organized solidarity of so many, so many years ago.

Like so always not too many Christians were at that time on the right side of history; they stood, like so often, with the rich, the establishment, the status quo. Only a few rescued the Christian reputation through their outspokenness; like later Dietrich Bonhoeffer. ... In my hometown Mainz it was Bishop Wilhelm Emmanuel von

Ketteler who preached in his Advent sermons from the pulpit for worker rights.

I think it is important to realize that we HAVE the tradition of solidarity in the US and that individualism was not always so extreme as in our days. To re-discover these traditions of the social gospel is ONE task for us Christians in 2011.

1889 the International Socialist Congress in Paris decided to have Labor Day on May 1st. Since then Labor Day gets celebrated in most countries in the world on May 1st. This is also the tradition I grew up with.

So one question remains: Why do we celebrate Labor Day not in May, but early September?

Labor Day became a federal holiday in the States 5 years after its proclamation through the International Socialist Congress - in 1894. President Grover Cleveland reconciled this way with the labor movement after the deaths of a number of workers at the hand of the U.S military and U.S. Marshals during the Pullman strike. The bill passed Congress unanimously.

As far as I know there are 2 reasons for the September Day rather than the more widespread "international Workers' Day" May 1st: First, the Central Labor Union and most national trade union's chose to observe the September date. Second, President Cleveland was

concerned, that the May date would stir up on a regular basis the negative emotions linked to the Haymarket Affair, where on Tuesday, May 4th 1886 workers and policemen were killed in Chicago in a riot.

This is the contemporary-historical background in front of which we meet our text – and Ezekiel [Is-ĭ-ki-el]. Again we will have room and time to share among each other, how this old text might be able to teach us about God's will for us.

Let us take now our bibles and let us read together the sermon text. Let us go to page 802 in the Hebrew Testament Section. Let us read together from the book Ezekiel, chapter 33, the verses 7-11.

7 So you, mortal, I have made a sentinel for the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. ⁸If I say to the wicked, 'O wicked ones, you shall surely die', and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but their blood I will require at your hand. ⁹But if you warn the wicked- to turn from their ways, and they do not turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but you will have saved your life.

God's Justice and Mercy

10 Now you, mortal, say to the house of Israel, Thus you have said: 'Our transgressions and our sins weigh upon us, and we waste away because of them; how then can we live?' ¹¹Say to them, As I live,

says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die, O house of Israel?

AMEN.

Before we open again the room for comments and own thoughts I would like to prepare the path and give us all a little bit of background information to what we just read together. But afterwards I am very eager to hear YOUR opinion, what YOU think what the message could be for us, who live here on Long Island, where the beaches are white and the shops filled.

Let me start this way: Ezekiel was a priest in Israel and got exiled with 3000 other upper class Israelites to Babylon. It would be as if we all here in church and 2970 others of Rockville Centre would be transported by invading Chinese to Peking – and would there live, work and affiliate with the Chinese culture; our children would marry Chinese boys' and girls, we would learn Chinese language and would become over a whole generation acquainted with the new social and cultural environment. And like in the days of Ezekiel or his maybe even more famous Exile-prophet colleague Isaiah there would be some of us, who would call for integration with the surrounding alien cultural Chinese environment, while others of us would call to preserve the own American cultural identity.

Ezekiel's request to the Israelites in exile, but also at home, can be summarized in the first words of our text, which I have chosen as headline for this sermon and service in general: *"So you, mortal, I have made a sentinel"*.

The Hebrew text says literally not "mortal" but "baen-Adam", what means: "son of Adam" or "son of man".

I am also not happy with the word 'sentinel' – when Marianne looked for a matching picture for our worship folder and googled the word "Sentinel" – what do you think which pictures she got? ... Exactly, pictures of Hell guards or Jim Ellison in the Canadian late nineties TV-series "The Sentinel"...!

But the Hebrew word is "zopaeh", which is a p ar-ticiple of "zapah", meaning simply "guard", "monitor", "keeper", "watcher" or "alerter".

I am honestly amazed how Ezekiel approaches his emotional and cultural so dysfunctional people. Look at the last verse 11, where he simply tells his folks that they need to reach out to their oppressors, the nation of Babylon, which rules the world and to bring this nation to God - instead of working for their demise [dimeis]: *"I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die, O house of Israel?"*

This is, what Ezekiel demanded 2600 years ago:

In chapter 1-24 Ezekiel accuses the whole nation of Israel to have turned away from God and to worship instead the wrong idols. Therefore, he prophesies, Judah will fall and Jerusalem will get destroyed.

In the second part until chapter 32, Ezekiel announces the fall of Judah's enemies – but surprisingly and interesting wise NOT the fall of Babylon, their immediate oppressor. Here God appears already as the Almighty, the God of ALL nations!

Our chapter belongs to the third part, compassing the chapters 33 – 39. Here Ezekiel comforts his people in exile, prophesies the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the temple and the return of God. To this part belongs one of the most famous and well-known pieces of the Hebrew Bible: Ezekiel's dream about the valley of bones, which get resurrected with flesh and skin through God's ruach / God's spirit.

The last part of the Ezekiel book covers the chapters 40 to 48. This part is usually pretty difficult for a Christian interpretation as it describes very detailed a coming Jewish theocracy.

These are Ezekiel's social requests: Protection of women and poor, giving bread to the hungry and to cloth the naked. His economic charter [tschatr] was: The waiving of interest rates and additional fees, fairness in trading through fair and accepted measurements. In general Ezekiel requested to avoid injustice, to seek justice and repentance.

In the context of Labor Day and with the historical knowledge of this text, I hand over now to you, asking you: What do you think, are WE today called to watch over? What are the values WE need to protect? What is OUR message to the people, if not to the whole world then at least to the people on Long Island?

[... Writing comments on Flip Chart ...]

Let me summarize:

We started today with some remarks about tomorrow's Labor Day, asking ourselves, what Ezekiel might teach us today in this context.

We hear in verse 7 God's call to stay strong as "guard", "monitor", "keeper", "watcher" and "alerter".

We collected among ourselves ideas, what WE should watch, guard, monitor or alert over or about.

We see in the last verse 11 how Ezekiel universalized and globalised God's liberating message to the WHOLE world, inclusive his own oppressors. Out of hopeless seeming position in exile a small group of people undertook the adventure, often also the risk to request the leadership.

This Chutzpah [Chótzpa] is amazing, this intrepidity [in-trí-pidness] makes speechless and commands admiration.

Our Christian job remains: To figure out, where God's commandments get hurt in our world, to name it loud and to work for

a better solution. Because we are lifeguards - like the guys at the beach with the life buoys! We are social guards, giving alert, when we think that something could be better done here on Long Island according to God's will.

Happy Labor Day! AMEN!