

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

Isa 40: 1-11

**“Words of Comfort”** (12/04/2011)

- by Rev. Peter Dennebaum -

God’s peace to you!

Let us read from 667 of the Hebrew Section of our bible, from the book of Isa, chapter 40, the verses 1-11 - and see then afterwards again, what has become important to you while reading.

### **Isa 40: 1-11 (God’s People Are Comforted)**

*Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. <sup>2</sup> Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins.*

*<sup>3</sup> A voice cries out. ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.* <sup>4</sup>

*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. <sup>5</sup> Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.’*

*<sup>6</sup> A voice says, ‘Cry out!’ And I said, ‘What shall I cry?’ All*

*people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. <sup>7</sup>*  
*The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord*  
*blows upon it; surely the people are grass. <sup>8</sup> The grass withers,*  
*the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand for ever. <sup>9</sup>*  
*Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift*  
*up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good*  
*tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, 'Here is*  
*your God!' <sup>10</sup> See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm*  
*rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before*  
*him. <sup>11</sup> He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the*  
*lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead*  
*the mother sheep. AMEN.*

Which sentence, sequence or word has become important to you while reading? And why? ...

The fisherboat pounds through the heavy, dark sea. Up and down through house high waves. No land insight. The wave crowns glow dangerous in the darkness. The machines in the body of the boat pound and work steady and unchangeable. Always in the same hard beat. Steady, merciless, always pounding, never ending, pushing the boat forwards, the mountains up, the valleys down. Breakers crash into the boat. From the right, from the left. They try to press the small boat down, into the sea. But the boat knows only one direction –

forward, to there, where the life is – hopefully, the saving port. This is what the boat wants: To be tied safe to the pier [pier]. No fighting anymore. No fear anymore. No restlessness anymore. Only peace. Simply peace.

This is what we want. This is what our text talks about. We want peace, forgiveness, rest. We want that our engines don't need to pound anymore through the rough sea. We seek to survive, seek the port, which bestow us hold, acceptance and peace.

Isaiah, Israel's grand and outperforming prophet, spoke to his people in a similar situation. The kingdom of Israel was divided already a long time. Salomon's dream of an in peace united Israel was broken; his son Rehobeam [**Re**-hobiem] had listened to the wrong people: The south part of the country with Jerusalem followed without problem the idea of a David-Salomon-dynasty [**di**-nesti]. But among the tribes in the north, on the old territory of Saul, still lived the idea of a charismatic leadership, leaders, who were called to lead for a specific period of time, based on their talents and gifts, they had to offer the community. Rehobeam traveled to the north, campaigned for the support of his governance. The tribes of the north asked him to take some pressure away some from the socage [so-kidsch], his father Salomon had put onto them. This request can be

understood as coronation request. Rehobeam asked for 3 days respite [res-peit]. He called his crown council together. But among them a generational conflict was going on. For the young people, called in by Rehobeam the request was a testing of authority. The experienced, grey haired advisers, still appointed by Salomon, advised towards a compromise. But Rehobeam listed to the wrong side – his own contemporaries.

Now the political catastrophe happened: Ten out of the twelve tribes, all of them located in the north, refused the loyalty, founded their own kingdom in the north and took with them the name Israel. But Rehobeam with his south kingdom Judah was still in the possession of Jerusalem, where the temple of his father remained as the central place of worship. This way divided, both parts of the nation were weak. The North kingdom Israel, cut off from Jerusalem, started to worship pagan Gods; So God sent Elija to warn them. The South kingdom Judah got seven years after the split invaded by the Egyptian Pharaoh Schischak, who took with him all the gold and treasure Salomon had collected. But even worse: 200 years later, in 724, the army of Assyria invaded the North Kingdom, bringing unmeasurable harm: Many Israelites were killed or taken away as prisoners or slaves to Assyria, which was located at that time, where you would find today on the map the Egyptian Sinai, the southern

part of Jordan and the north part of Saudi-Arabia.

This is the time in which the historical Isaiah was called to serve God as prophet and to bring again a message of God to the people of God.

To understand the political circumstances of Isaiah's message to the people we need to know that 12 years before, 734 BC, two kings decided to resist the Great Power Assyria: King Rasyan [Rasi-en] from Damascus (Syria) and King Pekach [Pie-katsch] from Israel. Both states were at this time already in the first stadium of vassalage [va-seldisch] – meaning: both still were allowed to rule themselves, but had to send contributions to Assyria. To extend their military basis for their conspiracy they tried to convince king Ahas from Judah. But he refused. So both states concentrated troops in the territory of Northern Israel. Then they invaded Juda and moved forward to Jerusalem. Their goal: To replace king Ahas of Judah by a more pliable [plei-able] person on David's throne. Against the urgent advice of the prophet Isaiah king Ahas sent for help to Tiglatpileser III. [Tiglait-pei-lierser III.], ruler of the Assyrian Empire. Tiglatpileser [Tiglait-pei-lierser] didn't hesitate long and squelched the revolution down. The kings from Damascus and Israel removed immediately their troops from Jerusalem, throwing them against

the approaching Assyrian army.

You can imagine how the conflict ended. Damascus got occupied and made to an Assyrian province. The kingdom of northern Israel got smashed: Galilee and Gilead became also Assyrian provinces. Tiglatpileser [Tiglait-pei-lieser] left King Pekach [Pie-katsch] only the rest, the torso state of Ephraim. Tiglatpileser [Tiglait-pei-lieser] deported also the upper class to Assyria, leaving farmers and craftsmen behind. In accordance with the Assyrian practice at that time a new, alien upper class got installed. King Pekach [Pie-katsch] himself became a victim of a conspiracy. Tiglatpileser [Tiglait-pei-lieser] allowed his successor Hosea to be his vassal [waessl].

All this got witnessed by the historical prophet Isaiah ben Amoz, who saw all these things happen from Judah, the second, the southern part of old Israel. Isaiah witnessed also the last part of the drama: King Hosea in the north had tried to form an alliance with his powerful neighbor Egypt. But Assyria was faster. King Hosea got arrested and the torso kingdom of Ephraim became Assyrian province, called Samerina. In 722 BC, the kingdom of Saul, the northern Israel did not exist anymore.

The historical Isaiah is responsible for the first 39 chapters of the book of Isaiah. The chapters 40-55 to an unknown prophet, who

we call deutero-[deutero]-Isaiah. Our sermon text belongs to him. He speaks into a time, which lies 125 years later, when Assyria had been replaced as regional economical and military power by Babylon, in todays Iraq. When Deutero-Jesaja spoke his words, Judah was not anymore either [iether]. Also Judah's upper class was now displaced, but not to Assyria, but to Babylon.

What can Isaiah's words and the knowledge about the historical circumstances teach us?

The first message is: Prophets were very engaged and outspoken to the rulers of their time. They comforted their people in faith, but tried to advice the politicians and rulers. They accused, they warned and they tried to counsel them into the right direction; sometimes with success, sometimes without.

We are both – we are prophets as well as the addressees [address-ies] of their message. We are called to be defenders of our faith against those who don't give us the rest and respect, God has assured for us. But we are also called to accept our weakness and the fact that we need God to keep the course.

People are like grass. Political powers come and go. Politicians, parties, governments, lobbyists come and go. But God remains.

And God's calling for us.

Many people in these days are under oppression: The man, who lost his job; The woman, who needs 3 jobs to support her children and herself; the college student, who has to go back to the parents, living with them, not knowing what the future will bring. Or the 75yo, who still has to work as waiter as the pension doesn't last.

When you are this fisher boat, pounding through heavy seas, fighting and struggling, often close to lose your faith and energy, not knowing, why you should go on, then this message is today for you:

*<sup>10</sup> See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. <sup>11</sup> He will feed (you) like a shepherd; he will gather (you like) the lambs in his arms, and carry (you) in his bosom [bu-sm], and gently lead the mother sheep.*

In all your turmoil: Keep going! Keep God with you in your heart. Light today the second candle at home and in your heart. And allow peace to move into your heart. It is God's warm light.

**AMEN!**