

## SUNDAY SERMON ISAIAH 62:6-12

*Kerstin Menzel*

A city in ruins, the houses still show the traces of past struggles, the brilliance of the past still glitters through the rubble. Large columns and sections of filigree relief lie between the collapsed floors. Huge holes yawn in the domes jutting into the sky. On the roadsides the debris still lies – no one has time to remove it. The most important thing is to restore supplies for daily needs. The turmoil of war has departed the city, and the people who once had their home in it are no longer here; others have settled in their place. Those who return do not know who they are living next to. Are you an enemy, are you a friend? They waited impatiently in exile and now everything is very different from what they expected.

The images of the ruined landscapes in Mosul or East Ghuta, to which people are returning at present, flicker across the television. Perhaps they will help us to have an idea of the situation which the sermon text for this Sunday addresses.

*Never again will I give your grain as food for your enemies, and never again will foreigners drink the new wine for which you have toiled; but those who harvest it will eat it and praise the Eternal, and those who gather the grapes will drink it in the courts of my sanctuary. Pass through, pass through the gates! Prepare the way for the people. Build up, build up the highway! Remove the stones. (Isa. 62:8-10)*

The people of Israel have returned from exile, but much still remains in disarray. What was earlier is no more. The disappointment is great. People had been expecting so much of the return and now they lack the necessities of daily life. The glory of Jerusalem has faded. Great hopes have not been fulfilled. That seems to be how it is in our world beyond Eden, in reunited Germany, in Europe, in Jerusalem and Israel. Not all dreams are fulfilled. The visions of the prophets are far-reaching, and no one can say whether it's a case of two steps forwards and one back – or two back and maybe one forwards.

Stress and despair are inscribed in the faces of the returnees. Their backs ache from the makeshift encampments where they spend the night, and from cleaning up the rubble. There can be no question of wine and grain in abundance. The promised land: it has not yet been reached.

But listen. From the newly-built walls voices are sounding: *I have posted guards on your walls, Jerusalem; they will never be silent day or night. You who remind God, give yourselves no rest, and give him no rest till he establishes Jerusalem and makes her the praise of the earth. (Isa. 62:6-7)*

What strange guards. They do not look out for enemies in order to cry out a warning. No, they don't give themselves or God a rest. Day and night, *va-y'hi erev, va-y'hi boker*, they remind God of the promise. Because what is, is not everything. There is something else; more has been promised.

They call God to account: the city is in ruins and life is worse rather than better. And yet you said, Eternal: *They will be called the Holy People, the Redeemed of the Lord; and you will be called Much Visited, City No Longer Deserted.* (Isa. 62:12)

They call God to account: The forests are burning and the fields are parched with drought. And yet you said, Eternal: *"See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland."* (Isa. 43:19)

They call God to account: children are drowning and the rescue ships are bound up in the harbour. Compassion stands defamed and the humane spirit despised. And yet you said, Eternal: *"For a long time I have kept silent, I have been quiet and held myself back. But now, like a woman in childbirth, I cry out, I gasp and pant."* (Isa. 42:14)

They call God to account: those who preach hate shout the loudest and cause evil; the voice of mercy is difficult to hear. And yet you have said, Eternal: *"I will lead the blind by ways they have not known, along unfamiliar paths I will guide them; I will turn the darkness into light before them and make the rough places smooth."* (Isa. 42:16)

They call God to account: many who speak your name – in whichever language of faith – have not learnt the craft of peace. And yet you said, Eternal: *"I, the Eternal, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness."* (Isa. 42:6-7)

They call God to account: In the Holy Land, parents on both sides of the border mourn their dead children. And yet you have said, Eternal: *"The law will go out from Zion, the word of the Eternal from Jerusalem. He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore"*. (Isa. 2:3b-4)

What strange guards. Remind God. And remind people of their responsibility. Angry at times, and sad, but the anger and grief do not silence them.

What strange guards. They keep the dream awake in the world beyond Eden, in Jerusalem, in Europe. Because what is is not everything. Because the promise of God is greater and the Creator intended the world differently. Because we humans are made to live together and to cherish and protect creation. Because God wants to live in community with us, and – despite all our stubbornness, our wrong decisions and self-centeredness – is always ready to seek us anew.

What strange guards. They read texts about the world on this side of the gates of tears, about Eden and about "behold, it was very good". They read in queer and postcolonial ways, they read the Qur'an and they read playful narratives. They set each other free to understand the texts in different ways. They struggle for the meaning of the old promises and the speeches about humanity and about God. They look after the treasure of Scripture(s), and they do not stop calling out to God – Shacharit and psalm reading and compline and Erev Shabbat and Havdalah and Vespers and Mass. *Va-y'hi erev, va y'hi boker*, day and night. Because what is, is not everything. They initiate the praise promised by God. They share the harvest and they break *matzot* and praise God, and they drink wine, the cup of salvation, in God's sanctuary.

Because what is, is not everything; what is, can change. (Jürgen Ebach)

“One should not indulge in any illusion that a wholehearted recognition of Jewish biblical scholarship will never take place on the part of non-Jews, and that genuine collaboration between Jews and Christians on the prejudice-free exploration of the Old Testament is a fiction.” This is how the liberal Rabbi Benno Jacobs writes in 1940. And here we are, celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> Bible Week. Like Adam in the Qur'an, like the people in the Nineveh story, Christians have acknowledged their sin and believed the prophets – and have repented. My generation benefits from those who have already cleared the stones out of the way. I am allowed to learn so freely with you because others have critically examined their own past, and their hermeneutics, their foundational theology, their Christology, their Paul, and their liturgy. With every member of the Bible Week family whom we commemorate in mourning, this place of learning also moves a little further into the hands of my generation. We will guard the heritage entrusted to us. We will fight to ensure that we do not fall behind what has already been achieved. And maintain the astonishment that repentance still remains possible even after nearly 2,000 years of a history of culpability.

*Pass through, pass through the gates! Prepare the way for the people. Build up, build up the highway! Remove the stones. Raise a banner for the nations. (Isa. 62:10)*

Because what is, is not everything; what is, can change.

A city in ruins. In the towers which reach into the sky, great holes yawn, and the fires still smoulder. On the morning after the firestorm, the great dome collapses and with it every hope of being able to preserve something of what was. The people who live in the incinerated ruins of Dresden refuse to use the stones for other purposes. Time passes, at some point roses are planted on the rubble. Time passes, and the ruin shifts from being a place of mourning for the missing and the site of state observances to being a place of resistance, a place of silent remembrance against war and violence. Time passes, the Wall comes down and people from all over the world follow the call from Dresden and donate millions. The church becomes a sign of reconciliation and peace. In it music and prayer are heard, God's word and God's blessing. For a city that desperately needs all of this. Like many other cities, beyond Eden. The ruins are still distinguishable between the newer and brighter sandstone blocks. And that's why it is visited so much. The old has passed, behold, and the new has come into being. Do you see it?

*Translation: James Baaden*

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