

SUNDAY SERMON ON ISAIAH 2:1-5

Johannes Stein

Can you imagine a stairway with six thousand steps? For a long time I couldn't. Once I climbed the tower of the Cologne cathedral with a few people. To the first platform it's one hundred meters – six hundred steps. So six thousand steps are ten times that many. Unimaginable. That's how I was until in December 2007 I climbed the holy mountain Gernar. Six thousand steps.

I was in Gujarat, the home of Mahatma Gandhi with my friend Gerd. In Ahmedabad we visited his ashram and were very impressed. And then we went to Junagath, seven hours by bus. We liked the city. And also the area. And then there was still this holy mountain Gernar, the mountain with six thousand steps. Our venturesome spirit was awakened. We decided to dare to climb the mountain. The evening before we left, a Swiss couple told us they had given up after half the stretch. That dampened our enthusiasm a little. We came to an agreement: We'll dare it, but we'll be honest with ourselves. If we're not strong enough, we'll turn around.

The night was short. We started out before sunrise. We weren't alone. We were in a whole procession. And we went very slowly. Everybody went very slowly. Six thousand steps were waiting for us. The steps we went were marked: 50, 100, 150 and so on. An impossible idea that we'd make six thousand steps. But we weren't alone on the way. Women and men, children and adolescents, older people as well. Everybody had begun the journey. Gerd and I felt part of a large community. Over and over again we were greeted with a smile and made welcome. Slowly, the sun rose, it became light and hot. Already on the way, we visited one or the other temple. We didn't lose sight of our goal, the peak. Somehow we always continued. And then we finally reached the peak's plateau with several temples. We had arrived!

That felt wonderful. We experienced another distant view. A group of students, men and women, from India invited us to a meal. So we sat in a circle on the floor, ate and talked. A real peak experience. And at some point we went down the mountain again. We had made it and were enriched with a deep experience. Our longing had been fulfilled.

Now we'll hear our homily text from the Book of Isaiah, chapter 2, verses 1 to 5.

I discover a big longing in these few verses: the desire for peace, the desire for the silence of weapons. Or as it says in the parallel text in Micah: “But they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid.” (Micah 4:4) A desire that has lost nothing of its meaning for the present day. I discover another longing: The people of Israel had experienced how they became a pawn and an object of exploitation through the big empires. And the authors write with a certain resentment: Our Mount Zion is higher than the mountains of

the Babylonian kingdom and the Persian world power. We have a message for all peoples. It is a word of the universal God, the Torah. A precious treasure. The authors were convinced: this message is good for all peoples. Thus the promise that everyone will set out on the path.

I discover in this ancient text impulses for us today. First of all, the painful recognition that the longing for peace is still not fulfilled. Not in Ukraine, not in Mali, not in Israel and Palestine. The idea that peace lies at the end of a long journey. I am convinced: There are more than six thousand steps. And nevertheless, as I see it, we need the courage to begin the journey. Even the farthest journey begins with the first step. We can learn that from Mahatma Gandhi. This Bible Week is also such a step. We have gathered together from different peoples and cultures. We spend time together, we listen to one another, exchange our ideas, we weigh what we hear and give one another impulses for continuing. These are all small steps. But from them a path is made. And in addition, we have a common foundation: the word of the universal God who is the God of Israel.

The book by Navid Kermani helps me when he writes: "When Sheikh Abu Said, one of the most famous Islamic mystics of the eleventh century, once came to Tus, a city in the northeast of present-day Iran, so many faithful came to the mosque in expectation of his sermon that there was no more room. 'May God forgive me', the usher called: 'May everyone come one step closer from where he and she are.' Then the sheikh closed the gathering before it had even begun: 'Everything I wanted to say and that all the prophets said, the usher has already said'. This was his explanation before he turned around and left the city."¹ –

So let us continue to walk. No matter how many steps are still to be climbed, six hundred or six thousand or more. The goal is worth every step. And from many steps a path is made. Our longing will lead us. And God will give our feet strength. For as we hear in the hymn of praise of Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist: "By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace." (Luke 1:78-79)

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¹ Navid Kermani, *Jeder soll von da, wo er ist, einen Schritt näher kommen: Fragen nach Gott*, München: Hanser Verlag 2022.