

SERMON FOR THE SUNDAY LAETARE

(Cape Town - 2 March 2008)

Text: ⁷ "For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with deep compassion I will bring you back. ⁸ In a surge of anger I hid my face from you for a moment, but with everlasting kindness I will have compassion on you," says the LORD your Redeemer. ⁹ "To me this is like the days of Noah, when I swore that the waters of Noah would never again cover the earth. So now I have sworn not to be angry with you, never to rebuke you again. ¹⁰ Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed," says the LORD, who has compassion on you. (Isaiah 54:7-10)

I have been a minister now for just over 20 years. The one experience I have is that whenever I have a sermon text, that really touches my heart and excites me the first time I read it, I struggle to write a sermon. This sermon text is no exception. The last verse, is a verse I learned off by heart as a student and when my best friend was ordained as a minister, I got somebody to carve this verse on a piece of wood and I gave it to him and said: "As a minister you will have many struggles. But remember: God's unfailing love will never be shaken and his peace will never be removed from you!"

I recalled that day, as I was reading the sermon this week. And as I read these lovely words of God, they touched my heart all over again. But this time around, there were also many open questions, which made writing this sermon more difficult. And I sincerely hope that I can share this message of God with you as it was intended by him.

There is very little doubt about the main intent of the message. It wants to convey to us what is deep down in God's heart when he thinks about you and me. The problem is that this may seem to be in conflict or at least in tension with what we experience on an everyday basis.

But let us start off by talking about the heart of God. The first point made by the prophet Isaiah is this: *God's heart throbs with compassion.* In other words, there is nothing that God wants to do more, than to be kind and compassionate to us.

But this is definitely not what the people of God felt at the time when these words were originally spoken. They were in exile, hundreds of kilometres away from Jerusalem. The city had been destroyed, the holy temple burned to the ground. And for about 50 years God had been totally quiet.

History teaches us that there was a "reason" for what happened. Between God and his people there was a "covenant" in place. This covenant, or agreement, stipulated: God would be their God and he would treasure them as his very own possession, and they in turn would obey him and keep his commandments!

But the people of God never kept their side. As we heard last week, many started serving the god of the Canaanites, called Baal. And not only Elijah, but one prophet after the other tried to call the people of God back again. But it was all to no avail.

And one day God withdrew his protection and grace. When the Babylonian king marched on Jerusalem, God did not intervene. The holy city was destroyed. The rulers of Judea became "slaves" in Babylon. Life was hard. *Then* (in Babylon) they prayed, but God did not answer. He was quiet.

And then, one day the prophet Isaiah stands up in Babylon and says: "I have a message from God." The people are all ears. They want to hear this. God hadn't spoken for 50 years. And he says: "***For a brief moment I abandoned you.***" I can imagine the people saying: "Stop! Brief moment? Are you joking? It's been fifty years."

And maybe there have been times when you felt: God has abandoned me and has been quiet for so, so many years.

Fifty years *is* long. But this passage is not about "time". It is about God's heart. And what we see in this passage is a "comparison". Fifty years of God's wrath are compared to what? Let's hear the full sentence. God says: "***For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with everlasting kindness I will have compassion on you***". "Fifty years" is *compared* with "everlasting" kindness. The message is: God's wrath, even 50 years, is minute compared with the length of his kindness.

Martin Luther wrote: God being a righteous God has no choice. He must resist and punish evil. But his heart is *heavy* when he is called upon to punish. Even as he punishes, his heart can't wait to show mercy again.

We have the same in the close of the commandments. You will know it from confirmation class. God punishes the children for the sin of the fathers to the *third* and *fourth* generation of those who hate him (and as we read, we may feel: That is a bit unfair) but (then it continues) he shows love to those who obey his commandment to a *thousand* generations! It is quite clear where God's "heart" is.

God must punish sin, but his heart is "love". Punishing sin, Martin Luther said, is his "foreign" work. Showing mercy and compassion that is his "primary" work.

That is the first point: God's compassion far outweighs his wrath.

But the prophet of God doesn't only make a comparison in this text, he also announces a "change". He announces something radically "new" in the God-man-relationship. We read in verse 8, God saying: "***I have sworn not to be angry with you, (and) never to rebuke you again.***" Now that is an extraordinary statement. God seems to say: "I am not going to unleash my wrath against you ever again".

Note this is addressed to God's people. And you may say: "I don't get this. I am a Christian and I have had struggles and hardships in my life, as long as my memory goes back. And you are telling me: God is never angry with me?"

I can assure you, based on this very sermon text: God is not in conflict with you. Never again. There is change. It is change from a brief moment of wrath to permanent grace. But this grace comes, if you like, in a box. It comes in a person. That is what we discover in the New Testament.

God still punishes sin. But his wrath is re-directed. His wrath hits his Son, Jesus Christ. We see it on Calvary. All the wrath of God is focussed on Jesus, who cries out in great agony: "***My God, my God, why have you forsaken me***". These words resonate what the people of God experienced in exile, just for a brief moment. But through "his" wounds, "we" we are healed. Even as Jesus is nailed onto the cross, he cries out: "***Father forgive them, for they do not what they are doing.***" And what we see

are arms extended to embrace us, like the Father embraced his prodigal son as he came home.

Paul writes to the Romans: ***“There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus”*** (Rom.8:1). The time of God-abandonment is gone. The prophet Isaiah announces the start of the era called “grace”. But it is grace localised in a person, called Jesus. It is grace that elicits, that calls forth, a response of faith. And when there is faith, when there is trust in Jesus, you are no longer a target of God’s wrath. It is true, as long as you are in Christ, God is never angry with you again.

But maybe the question I asked earlier still remains. We hear a message of God’s everlasting kindness, but we continue to experience hardships. At times life can be really tough. People become ill. Some engage in a business deal that falls flat. Others lose their jobs. Still others suffer unfair ridicule and rebuke. Aren’t these hardships a sign, that God may have withdrawn his presence from us?

The answer is a categorical “no”. Since the cross of Jesus, hardships are never an indication of God being in conflict with us. How can he? His wrath hit his Son. And if you are “in Christ” you are never a target of his wrath. On the contrary. Hardships form part of the “cross” that also we Christians are called upon to bear as followers of Jesus.

It is in the light of this insight that Paul can write to the Romans: ***“We rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope”*** (5:3-4). Clearly suffering does not mean that God has withdrawn his grace. On the contrary. It can testify to the close relationship or fellowship between Christ and you.

But you may still doubt? And that is why God provides his people with an analogy. He says to his people: “Look at the mountains.”. And I assume there were mountains in Babylon as Cape Town is surrounded by mountains. And God continues and says: ***“Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed.”*** We don’t expect Table Mountain to be shaken (there are no earthquakes in Cape Town). We don’t expect Lions Head or Signal Hill to be removed. Things like these generally don’t happen. But God says: “Even if they do... ***my unfailing love for you will not be shaken and my covenant of peace will never be removed.***”

You may personalise these words: In Christ God loves *me*. And this love for *me*, will never be shaken or removed.

Think about this as you enjoy the mountains of Cape Town. They can be a reminder of God’s unfailing, everlasting love for you. But as you look at the mountains, visualise a cross. We deserve God’s wrath, but we experience his grace, because of the cross of Jesus Christ. That is the new covenant.

When Jesus died, the curtain in the temple, tore in two. Since that day there is an “open door” to God. You are invited to enter that door and experiencing everlasting peace with God who loves you as his treasured possession. Amen.

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