

Sisters and brothers!

The Jewish writer Nelly Sachs once wrote: „Psalms are a shelter during the night. They act as a host for the wounds of our life’s journey!“

A Psalm as a shelter, a hostel, a safe haven. A Psalm as a refuge, as an asylum for people, whose life’s journey has inflicted pain on them. For people who need words in their misery, in which they find themselves and through which they can express themselves.

Psalms as a sort of lending library, which is on hand, as often as there are no words to articulate oneself in the presence of God.

Especially at times when heavy burdens are lying on the soul, when life’s path seems to lead downhill all the time, when attacked.

Then being able to pray in the words of others; then being able to discover, that we are not the first ones and not the only ones, whose lives are sometimes very dark; then being able to learn how the Psalms offer words and images, which can be entered into, which offer to be a hostel, a safe haven for us. A shelter where we can come in at night, calm down and sigh with relief.

One, who was in desperate need of such words was the prophet Jonah.

One day he meets God’s call to preach against the town and the people of Nineveh.

Jonah listens to this call. He understands everything immediately and he reacts at once. As if there was only one possibility, only one sort of answer to God’s call – he flees! He flees in the opposite direction.

His crisis starts with the first step he takes...the wounds of his life’s journey are no longer hidden.

People experience this still today. A single decision only starts a race to the bottom, a downward spiral which seems to be never ending.

As people are caught by a whirl of existential fright when they have to accept a medical diagnosis and they are no longer strong enough to fight it, the Book of Jonah tells about that in a dual way: geographically and emotionally at the same time.

Jonah walks down to Jappho, he enters the boat and climbs down into the ship’s hold, down to the lower deck. There he lies down, is no longer upright. He sleeps. Later, in the storm that appears, he will be thrown down into the sea, he sinks down into the deep, is swallowed by a fish and sinks down into the belly of the monster.

What is told as a geographic trip, starting at the heights of Jappho and ending in the belly of the monster, this trip is leading downward only and is, at the

same time, a description of Jonah's emotional condition. He is going to the dogs, downhill all the time. Deeper and darker all the time. Nothing but crisis, no more glimmer of light.

How good it is in such a miserable situation to find a shelter, a hostel for the night in the words of a Psalm. In words that help to confess sins, describe situations. Words to draw support from when seeking aid, when lamenting, asking for help or crying.

As Psalm 130 offers: Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. Or Psalm 6: Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am weak; Or Psalm 13: How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? Or Psalm 61: Hear my cry, O God; listen to my prayer. From the end of the earth I call to you, when my heart is faint.

As if all these prayers had been reserved for Jonah. They completely reflect his situation in the depth, in the crisis, in the downward spiral he is caught in. He is the lowest of the low – as we are sometimes too.

Three days and nights he is lying there in the belly of the fish, in the deepest darkness, three long Good-Friday-nights and days. Then he starts praying. And you can again follow the prayer, which can be found in your bulletin on page 3.

*Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish, saying, 'I called to the Lord out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice. (Psalm 120, 1) You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and your billows passed over me. (Psalm 42, 8)*

*Then I said, "I am driven away from your sight; how shall I look again upon your holy temple?" (Psalm 31, 23) The waters closed in over me; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped around my head (Psalm 18, 5; Psalm 69, 2) at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever; yet you brought up my life from the Pit, O Lord my God. (Psalm 103, 4) As my life was ebbing away, I remembered the Lord; and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple. (Psalm 142, 2) Those who worship vain idols forsake their true loyalty. (Psalm 31, 7) But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Deliverance belongs to the Lord!' (Psalm 50, 14; Psalm 116, 17)*

*Then the Lord spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land. (Jonah 2)*

This is a strange prayer, as Jonah is a strange person.

He has finished his race to the bottom, he is the lowest of the low, finds himself in the depth of the chaos-waters, in the belly of a monster...you cannot get lower – and what does he do?

He prays!

But not in his own words, he quotes a lot of words from the Psalms. I have marked them in your text in the bulletin. By the way: It is extraordinary to be able to quote so many words from different psalms by heart!

But not only that: He has manipulated all these words from the psalms, he has changed all of them.

As soon as you read these psalms in the Old Testament you will discover that all of these prayers are found in the present tense. Jonah has changed them into the past tense.

Instead of: „Out of the belly of Sheol I cry“, his prayer is: „Out of the belly of Sheol I cried“. In the same way he changed all the other prayers, too.

In his prayer Jonah looks back to a desperate situation he was rescued from, while he is in the midst of the misery in the belly of the fish.

Furthermore there is no confession of sins, as we would expect, not a single word about the storm, nothing about his refuge or the monster, no outcry, no cry for freedom!

He is sitting in the midst of his misery – and he looks back and thanks God for his deliverance.

What is it about this strange situation and this peculiar prayer?



For a better understanding I've printed a picture on the front of your bulletin.

There is nothing threatening in this painting. Just the opposite! The Jonah, who can be seen here, seems to feel very secure. Like an embryo in the womb of the mother or like someone who lies fast asleep far from any danger, absolutely not desperate and not in need. Rescued, sheltered and shielded.

That's the way his prayer has to be understood. Then it isn't strange any more. Jonah finds himself rescued in

the belly of the fish. Rescued from God's call to preach against the town and the people of Nineveh. Rescued and sheltered from God's demand to act! As long as he is in the belly of the fish, he succeeded in fleeing from God. That is very similar to the way we sometimes act.

When there are too many problems, we seclude ourselves shutting out the world outside, coiling up, slipping under the covers and refusing to leave our shelter.

Remember the reading from John, chapter 5.

A man is there who had been ill for 38 years, lying at the pool, called Bethesda. Being asked by Jesus if he wanted to be made well, he doesn't answer: Yes, of course!

He knows that being made well would mean walking on his own feet his life's path. He wouldn't be cared for anymore. He wouldn't be felt sorry for by anyone anymore. He would have to become active! Everything would change. No one would ask him any longer, 'Can I give you a hand with anything?' The everyday visits, the caring, the requesting, the meals on wheels, the regret, being the centre of attention, the soft bed...the shelter in the belly of the fish, far from any responsibility for himself, far from God's call to adjust his life along God's, sometimes uncomfortable, path...Jonah in the belly of the fish, the lame man at the pool, called Bethesda and most of us sometimes at the side of both men...

So Jonah prays his thanksgiving prayer, in devout words. The main thing is to be in harmony with God. That's the way Jonah hopes to get along, without confession of sins but with lamenting and asking. In the very depth he has found his ideal world, his private religion without consequences for his daily life. Rescued from God's call: *But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Deliverance belongs to the Lord!*

But that's not God's path for Jonah as it is not God's path with all of us: *Then the Lord spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land.*

One bible interpreter wrote ironically: The prayer made the fish sick to his stomach, so he had to vomit and spewed Jonah out upon the dry land.

It is not enough to have peace with yourself.

It is not only about your own salvation. Faith has to do with the salvation of others as well. It is not only about justification, it is about sanctification and Christian discipleship too. So Jonah finds himself upon the dry land again, still commissioned to preach against the town and the people of Nineveh.

Looking again at the picture on the front of the bulletin, we can discover that it also reminds us of a flower bulb that opens itself upwards. New life sprouts and will break through within a short time.

The picture and the bible text have a common message: Jonah experienced something like death and resurrection! His time in the belly of the fish, in the sphere of death isn't the final point for God, but a turning point.

To reach maturity, to become a person with character, we have to pass through night and death. The depth is the starting point for a new birth. To die – to stay with the dead – to be reborn – as western Christians confess in the Apostles' Creed.

Or, more concretely related to our life's journey:

Separation from world and people in a deep crisis – lonesomeness and prayer as meditation and preparation for a new part of life - a new task – return into life as a changed and new-born person.

Because God is in it, the deepness carries the seed of a new beginning.

For three days Jonah was in the belly of the monster, there are three days from Good Friday till Easter Sunday, the apostle Paul was blind for three days before he could see again as a new-born man after he has met Christ.

God does not leave us in the depth. In the depth we can meet God in a way that new life grows and comes to light.

And we will experience that God is a God *“who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist”*, as Paul writes in his letter to the Romans (Romans 4, 17)

After three days Christ arises from the dead.

Jonah does not stay in the depth, but follows God's call after three days.

We, as we are here today, can pray to God in the present tense, we can cry and moan in our prayers, and the night will not be able to detain us.

For God calls us out of the darkness and we will live in his light.

Like Elijah, who was fed in the desert; like the healed lame man at the pool called Bethesda, our new life will grow the same way and come to light.

Amen