

## The Siblings, Foolishness and Pride, are Both Deadly

Sermon for Reformation Day

Sermon Text: Jeremiah 8:4-7



<sup>4</sup> “You shall say to them, Thus says the Lord: When men fall, do they not rise again? If one turns away, does he not return?<sup>5</sup> Why then has this people turned away in perpetual backsliding? They hold fast to deceit; they refuse to return. <sup>6</sup> I have paid attention and listened, but they have not spoken rightly; no man relents of his evil, saying ‘What have I done?’ Everyone turns to his own course, like a horse plunging headlong into battle. <sup>7</sup> Even the stork in the heavens knows her times and the turtledove, swallow, and crane keep the time of their coming, but my people know not the rules of the Lord.”

In the middle of the Kalahari Desert in southern Africa, there lies the famous Okavango Delta. Locals call the Okavango River the unreasonable river because when it rains between May and November, incredible amounts of water and about 660,000 tons of fertile soil flow into the desert. The locals call it the “irrational river” because it eventually just fills up with sand instead of flowing to the sea like any proper river. Because the river sends so much fertile soil and water into the desert, once a year there is a natural paradise in the middle of the desert. All kinds of animals and birds gather there. There’s chirping, bleating, splashing, and a celebration of animals that reminds us of a big party in the animal world. And it’s happening in the middle of the desert. They build their nests there and have their young. In the wintertime, when the rain stops, the river simply ends. The party comes to an end and the birds and the animals return from whence they came. Or they search for other places where there is enough to eat and drink again. Sometimes, when there isn’t enough rain, the water doesn’t flow and the desert reclaims the small paradise before the little animals and birds have grown up. Then a great tragedy occurs in the desert. Because the large animals and the adult birds must leave their young so that the adults don’t perish as well. First the adult animals try to somehow coax their young and encourage them to fly away. But when that doesn’t work, the adults must leave, otherwise they would die too. The young become orphans overnight. And then the wonderful green is gone and so is the water. When this happens, you can observe a sad funeral procession. The young animals and birds can’t do anything against the sun. And they also can’t fly because they don’t even have feathers yet. Nevertheless, they get up and leave...just like that. They don’t know where they’re going and they don’t have any destination in mind. Young animals of all kinds make up this funeral procession. But without water and food and in the middle of the desert, you can quickly see a long stretch of dead baby animals. Again and again they get up and go. They keep falling over until the forces of the sun and heat have sapped their strength, and they lie where they are and die.

The animals want to live so badly. They really want to get up and go to their families. But it’s not possible. God speaks to us about Jeremiah and notices something crazy. That is that it is different with humans than with the animals in the Kalahari. Because people can get up and live. But they don’t want to. Even God is amazed beyond measure. How can it be that someone who can stand up, voluntarily

remains lying down. God speaks about His people and it's not about a starved and parched people, but it's about people who have all the strength and opportunity to stand up and they don't do it.

*<sup>4</sup> "You shall say to them, Thus says the Lord: When men fall, do they not rise again? If one turns away, does he not return? <sup>5</sup> Why then has this people turned away in perpetual backsliding?"*

What a sad story. The birds in the Okavango Delta know very well that they must get up if they want to live, and yet they can't. We also know what we have to do in order to live, and we can, but we don't want to. Do we know this story? When we humans go astray, we don't enjoy being put back onto the right path again. No, on the contrary: we hold fast to the wrong path as if that path were life itself. The behavior of the community in Jerusalem is not so unusual, rather it is human. As long as things are good for you as you go down this path (and perhaps better than usual) you'd rather stay in the wrong and not struggle unnecessarily. It is easier not to admit your mistakes. No one will see or know. It is easier to hide our many secret thoughts and simply conceal thoughts of hate, envy, selfishness. It is much easier to keep secret the lies or cheating which nobody knows about—no one needs to know. And yet this act of hiding and cheating is foolish. A stumbling man naturally wants to get up again but not the one who falls because of his own actions. Migratory birds know with absolute certainty when they must leave our hemisphere. Only humans don't know when they have exceeded their limits.

Dear congregation, do you know Nadelmann? He is the hero of a little story Woody Allen wrote. One day, Nadelmann went to the opera. There, he stretched too far out of his box to see the orchestra and then fell into the orchestra pit. Too proud to admit that it was an accident, he went to the opera every day for a month and each time repeated his fall. After a month, he suffered a slight concussion. Woody Allen says, "I made it clear to him that he could stop, now that he achieved his goal." Nadelmann replied: "No, just a few more times. I'm really fine!" Dear congregation, God shows through Jeremiah how absurd and ridiculous it is that people don't repent. God speaks to Jeremiah, and we hear the indignation that comes to us from God's kingdom: "ARE THEY OUT OF THEIR MINDS? They can stand up, yet still they say: 'No, we would rather sit here and stay in the filth.'" It is human not to admit one's sin. It is human to always think up counterarguments. Yes, not to admit that I was wrong here or there, but let us say today: human is sometimes pretty foolish!

Sometimes the miracle does happen that a person sees clearly. Sometimes God's Spirit shakes a person awake. Jeremiah was just such a person. So was Martin Luther. He wanted people to get up from all their meanderings and from the mire of self-righteousness. And he showed us exactly how to do it. In the first of his 95 Theses, he tells us: "When our Lord Jesus Christ called us to repent, He wanted the whole life of the person to be one of repentance." Repentance is often ridiculed—it means to humble yourself and to put on sackcloth and ashes on throw yourself onto the ground. Here these terms are colored in a completely different way: with an upright walk, with insight into the right path. The one who thinks he doesn't need repentance, confession, or penitence is shown to be foolish and blind—like someone who remains lying in the dirt when he falls or like someone who would rather wander around instead of finding the right direction. A careless horse that plunges full force into battle inevitably causes its own ruin. The person who doesn't repent is like that horse. Repent? Repent means that we finally stop with the nonsense. Finally stop loving death more than life. Finally stop throwing ourselves into the depths just to prove a point, like Nadelmann. Finally realizing that our God wants life and not death. Martin Luther later talked about this until he was blue in the face. The opposite of a will that is connected to God is not free will. Martin Luther writes:

**“A person like you and I thinks: To be free means to have no master or to be one’s own master,” that would seem obvious in light of the Enlightenment. “Poor horse! What rides you then? If not the devil, then you ride yourself, but probably both ride you to your death.”**

Dear congregation, God is the one who knows us, who knows how things are with us. We deceive ourselves if we think that we can make wonderful decisions for ourselves.

This is terrifying and comforting at the same time.

Frightening because here at the highest level of authority, God hints at knowledge about us and our existence, a knowledge that turns our fantasies about human ability and human understanding upside down. We trust in the powers of the politicians and scientists and in human reason, also in our own abilities. Yes, even in western Christianity, reason has long since pronounced its victory over God and faith. And yet time and again we end up there, where we didn’t want to go. And we have only ourselves to blame! Even then, like Nadelmann, we will throw ourselves into the orchestra pit again and again so that we don’t have to repent or recognize what is wrong with us. Our world has unfortunately already suffered more than a concussion from such stubbornness. The picture that God gives to us through Jeremiah is as clear as it is evident: a horse riding into battle, summoned to its own destruction. A person who blows up himself and many other people with a loud cry of Allahu Akbar is the human counterpart. But, when God talks to us through Jeremiah, He doesn’t necessarily mean the fundamentalist terrorist. Rather, God talks with His own people—that is, with us, with the Church. And there He discovers many fundamental things and perhaps also the cause of all evil—people who call themselves God’s people, who celebrate their worship services and don’t praise the true God but other gods. They do this with great conviction and with all their strength, and we know exactly what is meant by that. From our catechism we learn where your heart puts its trust, there is your god. Where does your heart put its trust? What is the most important thing in your life? Yes, we run away with all strength and with all means, but what is the destination of our race? We use all our strength, sometimes even more than we must, but why? Asking in all honesty, how many goals that we are now chasing with such force must go to the grave with us? I don’t mean that we must separate ourselves from the world like hermits searching for a stone in the desert—no longer working, no longer studying, no longer providing for the family—but it should be clear to us whose children we are. That becomes clear in our actions. And there we go Sunday after Sunday from God’s house into the world, thoughtless, aimless, headless, and heartless like the stallion riding off into battle and not like God’s children. If God speaks like this, then it is because He knows that it can also be different. It doesn’t have to end in such a way that we deteriorate miserably like the birds in the Okavango Delta or like the stallion driven with full force into the abyss of the war. There is another way.

It is comforting that such insight comes from the mouth of God who doesn’t become a depressed hater of humans because of such insight. With loving care, God says it out of His heart. Not with the contemptuous aversion of a know-it-all, but with God’s persistent care that is speechless since the fall of man and yet calls out: ADAM, WHERE ARE YOU? God’s heart bleeds here when He searches for us humans and even then asks about us when we, against all reason, remain sitting here. God still searches for us there and doesn’t stop appealing to our hearts. That is what ultimately gives us a reason to repent... As it is written, “Do you not know that it is God’s grace that leads you to repentance?” If a person repents it is not because Nadelmann finally gained insight. Then Nadelmann would be pious and we would turn the horse that rides itself into battle into a pious horse that rides itself into battle. Don’t

we do that all too often? Those who repent become fighters for God's cause and fight against their own brothers and sisters who are down on the ground. None of us are immune to such thoughts, instead of throwing ourselves into the hand of God, instead of agreeing with Him and hoping for everything from Him. Instead of happily declaring ourselves bankrupt and reaching out our empty hands to God. "It's true that we are beggars!" Martin Luther is said to have said this on his deathbed. Instead, we pick on our brothers. In doing so, we want to show the world our beautiful and piously superior faces. When all that is necessary is God's grieved face. All that is necessary to show the Crucified One who takes seriously the depths of our laying down.

Nadelmann is not a role model. Nadelmann is ridiculous. The good advice he receives, we also receive from God: pause, come to a standstill for a moment; stop, you don't have to prove anything to yourself or me or to the world; turn again to Me, to the God who gave you this life. Everything then comes back into the proper perspective. Even your guilt. Yes, that is another message that the world has painted for us—repentance. God is not the teacher who puts you under increasingly greater pressure to perform. God is not the boss who stands next to your workplace with a stopwatch. God is not the lover who loves you as long as you are healthy, beautiful, and successful.

God is the father who only wants one thing: for you to turn back to Him. Penitence, repentance, and confession are not signs of weakness to Him but rather of wisdom and prudence. He always has an open ear for you. He knows your needs and He also knows that we often fall down again. And He knows how we are doing. He knows how to work in us the will and the ability to stand again. And whoever stands in this way doesn't race like the wild stallion into the next battle but stands and will be resurrected to new life with Christ. Amen.