

“Comfort, comfort my people!”

Pastoral Letter to the Congregations of SELK

Isaiah 40:1-2a, 6a, 8

¹ Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. ² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, ⁶ A voice says, “Cry!” And I said, “What shall I cry?” All flesh is grass... ⁸ The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.

Dear congregants, dear guests and friends of the Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church,

Grace be with you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ! Amen.

With this pastoral letter, I address you to relay what God has always given His people and His Church in hard and dark times: the comfort and confidence that flows from His Word.

A Personal Example

Our first grandchild is 10 months old. Now and again at night the child wakes up in the dark. I imagine how he opens his eyes and neither sees nor hears anything. Everything that is familiar to him seems to have disappeared. The child begins to cry. Then his mother or father comes, opens the door, and a little light shines into the room. The child is lifted out of bed and feels the closeness of his mother or father, hears a few whispered words of comfort, and immediately becomes calm because the loneliness and the menacing darkness are removed by his mother or father’s words.

In the Advent and Christmas season that lies ahead of us, we may feel like such a child: everything lies in darkness before us. Many people fear for their economic existence these days. In times of crisis, illness becomes even more threatening. Moreover, for some of our fellow believers from Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, or Syria, there is the fear of not being allowed to stay in our country. We will not be able to meet in big groups to sing the Advent and Christmas carols. The big family gathering at Christmas is likely to be cancelled and loneliness could become an increased problem in these days. In what way we will experience Christmas services is still uncertain. In addition, the energy in the community and church dwindles to endure all of this with patience. In many places, anger and distrust against those in charge are widespread. It makes one want to cry like a child in the dark of night.

Comfort from God’s Word

Then the door of God’s Word opens and a ray of light shines into the darkness and it is God who takes us in His arms and says softly in our ear: **“I comfort you. I speak tenderly with you. Your warfare is over. Your iniquity is forgiven.”**

The word from the prophet Isaiah that is at the top of this letter, addresses the people of God who, after they were carried off into a foreign country, had lost all hope of returning home. Also at that time, there were two groups: the one group that very quickly adjusted to the situation, who made the best out of a difficult situation, and quickly built a new life for themselves. And there was the other group that was filled with sorrow and anger. Even then, that produced great friction.

Is the Present Hardship Punishment from God?

For the people of Israel, captivity was their punishment from God. The prophet left no doubt about that. That's why many Christians today also ask the question of the spiritual interpretation of the present hardship. This question requires a twofold answer: On the one hand, the viral disease that is currently plaguing the world is a natural phenomenon. Scientists are working under high-pressure and apparently with good success on researching and fighting the virus. Doctors and nurses, with their skills, give their best knowledge and all their strength to help the sick.

On the other hand, the current situation really does feel like a judgement from God, and illness is ascribed to creation after the fall. The Christian faith confesses that nothing happens in this world without God's permission. But if you begin to think about this statement, you come across the dark and hidden side of God, that we can't understand and that can lead us to despair. That God seemingly lets so much disease, hardship, and all other plagues of mankind occur, we simply cannot understand. We start to feel like the Israelites in captivity.

Look to Christ

The Prophet Isaiah is called the evangelist of the Old Testament because he proclaims the comfort of God through the servant of God who became man in Jesus Christ. **"Cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned"** it says here at the beginning of the great chapter of comfort. And a few chapters later the servant of God is announced of whom it is said: **"Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows.... He was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities."** (Isaiah 53:4a & 5a) Jesus Christ has already experienced all our suffering firsthand and is therefore our comfort in the dark of night.

And so, we pray to Jesus Christ and trust Him as if there were no doctors and we use the skills of the doctors as if there were no prayer.

Trust is Necessary

The current developments in our society and partly also in our church can be described as a great loss of trust. People take to the streets because they have apparently lost trust that politicians mean well despite the capacity for error. Trust in the possibilities of research and science or responsible media and press is lost with some people.

In some places, there is the risk of losing trust in one another in the church and community that we are doing the right thing in dealing with the crisis from different perspectives and that we don't want to harm the church.

Why could that be? Trust is a force that turns outward. It is not without good reason that we say that we "trust" someone. I can't help but get the impression that our society as a whole is "sick" with the coronavirus, as in suffering from the consequences. Those who are sick often no longer have the strength to look out for others. The sick person's gaze is naturally directed entirely on themselves. This could be a reason why the strength to trust is fading. Trust is actually another word for faith and we say that faith is given by the Holy Spirit because it is a force that we ourselves cannot produce. The power of the faith worked by the Spirit holds the Church and her members together. Even if trust in institutions and faith in God are fundamentally different, I have the impression that the decline of faith in our country is also a cause of the decline in social unity which is intensified by the Corona crisis as if by a magnifying glass.

The people in our country need the comfort and the love of God so that trust can grow again.
Yes! Comfort, comfort, my people!

Keeping an Eye on Recovery Together

In the second part of the book of Isaiah, it is announced that the people will also return home at some time in addition to the spiritual comfort of forgiveness. This hope is also important to the people.

If we all suffer the consequences of the Corona crisis in different ways and to different degrees and are already indirectly “sick” in this way, then it is of great significance that we also want to leave this time behind us and not lose hope of this. Just like someone who has broken a leg, sits gratefully in a wheelchair and enjoys being driven, the will to learn how to walk again is crucial. All the technical possibilities that we appreciatively engaged and discovered for ourselves are welcome tools that make our lives easier in this difficult time. Much of this will certainly be of use to us in the future.

Nevertheless, we want to be “healthy” again and pray to God about this. We are very thankful for all the types of community that modern technology makes available to us. But: corporality shapes our being. With Christmas we celebrate the incarnation of God in His Son Jesus Christ. God gives us this corporality with the body and blood of His Son in Holy Communion. We also hope that God gives us new opportunities to meet one another face to face and to be physically close.

Thankfulness

In these weeks and months, I experience a lot of valuable action and effort in our congregations. Church leaders and other volunteers test their limits to make worship services possible. In many places, pastors, pastoral officers, parish vicars, volunteer pastors, deacons, vicars, and lectors, together with their congregations continue to offer online worship opportunities, while also accepting full personal commitment to the challenges of face-to-face worship services among Corona conditions. We have experienced a lot of beautiful and creative things this year. On behalf of the church leadership and college of superintendents, I thank you very much.

A dedicated task force to cope with the Corona crisis in our church has repeatedly dealt with the situation in the last months and processed a number of individual questions. The task force supported the formation of this letter. Thank you so much! Another task force concerned itself with the intermediate consequences of this crisis. I would also like to thank them for their work.

A difficult year draws to a close and yet I perceive the message from many congregations that the willingness to donate has not declined. We are very thankful for the abundance of gifts and sacrifices in time and money.

God’s Word Remains

The child in the arm of his mother or father needs few words to regain its orientation. If we spend Christmas this year in worry and insecurity and miss out on a lot, the silence can again

help us to hear the voice of God whispering in our ears, very close and undisguised: “the grass withers, the flower fades, but the Word of our God will stand forever.” God’s promise is clear: He is with us in every need. That is true. It applies to us too.

I personally wish you and your families and communities, in this difficult time, a blessed Advent and Christmas.

For the first Sunday in Advent 2020

Bishop Hans-Jörg Voigt D.D.