

Winter Series 2021

I am Called into a family that is a blessing to this world

11 July I am called!

You can also watch the sermon on YouTube:

In English: <https://youtu.be/Vmy2-hFbRcQ>

In Deutsch: <https://youtu.be/rc0zLn6UCsc>

Mt 28, 16-20

The eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. 17 When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. 18 Then Jesus came to them and said, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.'

Dear sisters and brothers,

A wonderful text, and very well known. There's one little half sentence that very often gets overlooked. It has only three words in this English translation: "but some doubted".

These three words have become very important to me, especially in these times of uncertainty where one day we can celebrate services and just the next day we are told "sorry, the Corona virus is too strong!" and we can no longer gather in churches. Where one moment it looks as if we're moving forward, and the next moment we are told to isolate, to distance ourselves again.

When I want to be joyful and praise the Lord and worship Him, somehow deep down, there's this doubt of "What's going to happen? Where are we? Where are we heading to?"

That is why I am glad that these three words are written here. If these disciples who were with Jesus for three years and who now stand in front of him, who see him, if some of them still doubt, then I realize it's okay to doubt.

When we think of the readings that we have heard so far on this Sunday: Psalm 139 speaks about that we are surrounded by God; that He is all over. But have you noticed that the second half of this Psalm has a different tone, it's almost as if the Psalmist is in depression -speaking about depths of darkness, of difficult times. The Psalmist, looking back at his life, knows that there were times that were just terrible, and only in hindsight he says: "and even then, you Lord were there."

Think of the watch word for today. We heard it at the beginning, from Isaiah 43, "Do not be afraid I have called you by name you are mine." It's so wonderful! But have you noticed how it starts? "Do not be afraid!" That means that this word was spoken to people who lived in fear, who were doubting, who were not sure whether God was indeed there.

Yes, doubt is part of our lives. To hear this text from the New Testament saying, that some disciples doubted, is wonderful to me. It is telling me that the disciples were like you and me, normal people, who needed to be lifted up by Jesus!

From this text I want to dwell on three thoughts. Next to me I have a candle that has got four wicks: one in the middle, and three around it.

I'm going to light one outer wick for each thought.

1. Assurance

The first light burns for the assurance that God gives. The Psalmist received assurance from the Lord: You are there. You know me. You've been there all the time. You go with me. Before I can think something, You already know it! It's an assurance, a promise that he receives from God.

Then I think of Isaiah 43, where this assurance is repeated many times over when we read all six verses:

"I will be with you. I will guide you. I am there. I will hold you, you are mine! " - just to mention a few. A wonderful assurance.

In the gospel reading we heard it in Matthew 28 where Jesus starts off by saying: "All authority in heaven and on earth is given to me." This Lord of all authority continues to say to his disciples "and surely, I am with you always."

The wonderful thing about the assurance of God is that it is given at the start. It is foundation! The assurance is not the end result of my faith, it is not the reward that I receive when I'm strong. The assurance is given to the disciples while they are doubting. The assurance is given to the Israelites while they are afraid. The assurance is given at the beginning. In Jeremiah 1,5 the prophet hears that the Lord says to him: "Even before you were conceived, I had already known you!" Even before my life started the assurance that I am called by name was already given!

Today the Sunday theme is baptism. Baptism is this assurance given to me, spoken to me, "I have called you by name, you are mine!" I am born anew in Christ! That assurance is not the end result of my strong faith, but it's the beginning of the journey as Christian. In our tradition when we baptize children. This makes it even more clear that this is the beginning of a journey. Right at the beginning the Lord says "You are mine!"

Even for those who baptize at a later stage the baptism is not the end but the beginning. Ever baptism is the proclamation that the Lord says "I have called you, you are mine, I am your Saviour!"

This assurance is what carries us. It's not that we get it when we do not doubt, No! the assurance carries us when we are doubting, it carries us through when we don't see the way forward. It is then that I need to hear that the Lord is there!

That brings me to the second wick that I want to light.

2. Learning

Jesus in this passage says to the disciples "Therefore go and teach the people". The second wick is about learning, because this assurance needs to be learned, because we

keep on forgetting. The disciples were walking with Jesus for three years, but standing in front of him some still doubt. Doubt is deeply part of our lives therefore I need to keep on learning what Jesus has taught. I need to learn about his promise.

I must admit that we as church failed miserably in this regard. All too often we baptize babies and then just leave them. They grow up never knowing that they really belong to Christ. We confirm children and send them into the world but they never really learn to live as Christians.

Learning in this regard means that I learn to listen for his assurance; this promise of the Lord. As I learn to discover it in my daily life it gives me strength.

I don't only learn it during confirmation class. The most important, ongoing place where I learn about this is in the Bible. While travelling to our congregations I love to ask the question: "How many of you read in the Bible daily?" I'm glad to say that many people are honest enough to *not* put up their hand. At the same time I'm sad to then see how many people don't make a habit of reading in the Bible. Reading in the Bible is like eating, you don't eat to please someone (yes, sometimes we do) but we eat because we need it. We need the food to give us strength. We need scripture, we need the daily reading. Why? So that we can discover this assurance for ourselves, so that we can taste that the Lord is good.

As you read through the Bible you will be amazed how often it will speak to you into your daily situation, into your concrete situation and tell you: "I am there! Remember I have called you by name. I will not abandon you my child!"

I therefore encourage you to really make a point of reading the Bible on a daily basis - it's for your own good. It's not to please God, but it's because God wants to please you. He wants to strengthen you!

That brings me to the third wick in the candle.

3. Living as Christian

The third wick speaks to the part where Jesus in Matthew 28 says: "and teach them to obey everything I have commanded you." This is not a call into a legalistic life. This speaks to being a disciple. Disciples are people that follow, who radiate Christ through their lives. That is what we are called to.

First we hear the assurance.

Then we learn to discover it for ourselves.

Now this assurance wants to transform our lives so that Christ becomes visible through us.

The Corona virus is highly infectious. Many people have died because of it. Many are suffering from the consequences of being ill.

Christianity is highly contagious, but the end result is not death. The end result is life, is joy, is the realization that I am called, I am special, I am loved, that I live, because Christ gives me life!

We are called to live this contagious Christian life. It doesn't happen by us talking to other people and telling them how bad they are and that they must turn around. It happens through us living Christ, following his teachings, his example.

Living as Christian does not mean that I'm not doubting, rather it means that I admit to being a doubter and then can testify how the Lord still carried me. That I can cry with others and others can cry with me. We can pray to the Lord and be comforted by him.

Being a witness to Christ does not mean that I'm without a mistake. When we look at the lives of the disciples, it is clear that they made many mistakes. Being a witness to Christ means to be able to say: "I made a mistake, I'm sorry, please forgive me!" and more important, being a witness to Christ means to say to someone who has hurt me: "I forgive you just as Christ forgives me." That is where Christianity becomes contagious. Not when we are blameless but when in our faults the love of Christ becomes visible, when through our lives with all their mistakes the love of Christ radiates and forgiveness shines.

I hear the assurance: "I'm called by name!"

I learn to discover it in the Bible every day, discover it myself and I learn to live as a follower of Christ.

Now I want to light the fourth wick. It's in the middle. It represents you and me.

I said earlier on that the promise of Christ is at the beginning of the text that we read, Matthew 28. We also read it right at the end: "and surely I am with you." I am surrounded by my good Lord. His assurance is at the beginning of my life, and will be with me till the end of it.

I was baptized in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. It's me in the middle, surrounded by Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Kept in him, kept safe in him.

I am surrounded by his assurance; I am surrounded and lifted up by him daily reminding me. I am strengthened so that I can live to his glory.

Today we heard it once again or perhaps for the first time "You are called by name." Christ is your Lord you are kept in his grace. His assurance stands at the beginning of your life and his assurance will carry you to the end of times.

Let us pray:

Lord, we thank you that you surround us. As the psalmist has said "Wherever we are you are there." and as Jesus Christ promised, till the end of times you are there.

Thank you, that I can hear you calling me. Thank you that I belong.

And the peace of God which transcends all understanding keep your heart and mind in Christ Jesus.

Amen.

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