

Sermon on Hebrews 13:20-21

by Pastor Alexander Mielke on April 6, 2008

Martin Luther Church, 2379 Lake Shore Blvd West, Toronto

www.martinluther.ca

20Now may the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, 21make you complete in everything good so that you may do his will, working among us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Dear Congregation!

This is Christ's mission: To bring peace, to fill the entire world with God's peace. At the beginning of these verses from the Letter to the Hebrews, the God of peace comes before our eyes, he shines forth like the majestic horizon, from which the mission of Jesus is to be understood. I am reminded of the morning of Easter Sunday, when a fairly large group, almost 70 people, gathered on the shore of Humber Bay West Park, to greet the Easter morning together. And as we heard the Gospel of the resurrection of our Lord, the sun rose above the horizon and filled everything with light, also us, who were cold in the morning air, the city of Toronto, the huge Lake Ontario. The message of the resurrected Christ shines as a powerful horizon and wants to draw the entire creation into the communion of the God of peace.

Barely a week later, there was the world-wide action of the Earth Hour. To use as little electricity as possible for one hour, to give a signal against the waste of

electricity. What was begun in Sidney was taken up by over 300 cities around the world, countless people, firms, organisations took part in turning off the electrical devices, to reduce electricity consume by at least 5 %. “Let there be dark!”, was a headline, and the amazing thing is, that particularly this motto represents a light of hope for the future of our planet earth!

I have special memories of this Saturday, for early in the morning I took part in a Bird Walk in Humber Bay East Park, just a few meters away from the point where we had celebrated our Sunrise Service. It was a wonderful morning. In the small bays of the park we could discover many birds. I find it great that in this huge city of millions of people, which represents one of the economic centres of North America, it is possible, at the same time, to observe a part of the beauty of nature, such a riches of the bird world. I do not know much about this, and I was glad that the leader was so knowledgeable and pointed out to us the bufflehead, redhead, scaup, scoter or horned grebe. And the highpoint was that we could observe the harlequin duck. From afar, it first appears just dark, only by looking closer one recognizes the beautiful, many-coloured feathers of blue, chestnut brown and white hues. In my bird lexicon, the harlequin duck is mainly marked down for Alaska and Polar zones; it is great to be able to experience this bird practically at our front door!

And yet – how endangered is the beauty of creation. We know why Earth Hour is an important, symbolic action. Global warming, caused by the rapid industrialization, is responsible for many problems, and Canada ought to have special concerns. When images of the melting glaciers and ice shelves from Polar regions go around the world, then Canada is particularly affected by this threat to nature. At the end of March we saw satellite photos, which were distributed by the National Snow and Ice Data Center of the University of Colorado. A 414 square kilometre big piece brakes off the Wilkins-Ice Shelf in Antarctica, ice that has existed for over several hundreds of years, brakes, dissolves, because of global warming.

Jesus is called the „great Shepherd“ in the Letter to the Hebrews. This is a central image of Jesus, and we know that the very first pictures in which Jesus was ever portrayed – drawings from the catacombs in Rom – show Jesus as a shepherd. What is special about a shepherd? A shepherd lives with his animals. He does not lock them up in a stable, no, the shepherd is outside with his animals. He accompanies his animals into their natural surroundings; he cares for his animals so that they find grazing and water, he shares with them the burdens of the road, rain, cold, storm; all this he withstands together with his animals. The shepherd does not take advantage of his animals, he shares his life with them. Therefore, the shepherd in John 10 can be a central image for Jesus' actions. Jesus says, „I am the good shepherd. He goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice.“

Besides Jesus, there is another person in the Bible who embodies the figure of a shepherd: Noah. When there is terrible danger, Noah fills the ark with all types of animals, and he thereby saves them. When huge amounts of water threaten life on earth, he takes all endangered animal species into the ark. In Noah we see a great love of animals and of nature. He applies all his strength in order to protect the entire animal kingdom during a terrible catastrophe; he is truly a shepherd.

In February, I read about a modern ark of Noah.

Beans, wheat, barley, rice, corn, potatoes, pasture grass, - hundreds of thousands of seeds of many thousand types of these and other useful agricultural plants are presently on their way to the arctic. They come from all over the world. Their destination is the Svalbard Global Seed Vault (SGSV), the new international gene bank on Spits Bergen.

The facility in Norway was cut into a mountain in about one and a half year of construction time. A tunnel of 120 meter length leads into the sandstone, where there is eternal frost. At the end of the passage there are three safe vaults, each of them measuring 24 times 15 meters. They are the heart of the gene bank; there the sample seeds are stored at minus 18 degrees Celsius. The cooling chambers are spacious. More seed samples can be accommodated here than in all the existing gene banks combined. It is estimated that one and a half to two million types are stored in gene banks world wide, and the SGSV offers space for about-four-and-a-half million. It is managed by Global Crop Diversity Trust, a foundation seated in Rom with the World Food Organization.

Even in the case of a failure of the cooling systems, the permafrost would be sufficient to cool the seeds for the next 200 years. The forecasted floods caused by climate change could be also overcome. Even if all the ice is melted, which presently covers Greenland the Arctic and Antarctic, the facility would still be situated 60 meters above sea level.

Indeed, a modern Noah's Ark, which can protect life of the plant world here from future dangers. I was always impressed by the interpretation of the Story of the Great Flood by Helmut Thielicke, the famous theologian and preacher, who taught at the University of Hamburg for a long time. He has emphasized that Noah was able to save the animals, because he built a technological device, which protected them from the terrible catastrophe. Yes, the Ark of Noah is a classic example for the use of technology in the service of nature!

Helmut Thielicke had apparently a deep personal understanding of this. Born 1908 in Wuppertal-Barmen, he fell ill with a life-threatening disease as a young man. First he suffered from goitre, an operation had catastrophic results, he was ill with severe postoperative tetanus all his life. Time and again he was seized by horrible and painful tetanus cramps, which affected the respiratory tract, so every

time he was close to death. He could continue his studies only under the greatest difficulties. For four years he traveled from university clinic to university clinic, at last, as a 25 year-old man he was so weak, that he could just sit in a wheel chair. He was desperate and contemplated suicide.

But then a doctor informed him that he had received a newly discovered medication, which, although not tried out yet, would be available to him, if he were willing to do the test it. Helmut Thielicke says "I received a bottle from the ward doctor... On it, it said ,Poison', which was probably a warning because of not being tested yet. This warning was, at the same time, the reason for not daring to give me but the smallest dose. When it did not help, I drank the whole bottle in my desperation. I wanted to force the decision. Either the medication would help in this maximal dose or the ,poison' would kill me. Again and again I looked at the crucifix opposite my bed. After my discharge, I was allowed to keep it and it is still hanging above my desk. The tremendous alarm, which my action triggered in the clinic, touched me only slightly. When I awoke the next morning..., I felt happy in an unexplainable manner. I had the feeling of being saved, and experienced something like a euphoric current of strength in my limbs. This waking up happened on Good Friday in the year 1933. I have always regarded... this as a miracle."

To be saved from a terrible illness on Good Friday. And this happened because of a medication developed in the laboratory of the Berlin Charité. After this experience, Helmut Thielicke could never see, in the last sense, faith and science as opposites, or nature and technology. He was like Noah, through trust in God and through the sensible use of technological possibilities, his life was granted him once more.

This, for me, is an important indication. We can preserve the creation only through sensible use of technology. As much as natural riches today may be

threatened by human technology – we cannot go backwards. We can go forward only. We can only, time and again, face the necessary decision, to use science and technology for long-term preservation of our natural foundations, instead of misusing it thoughtlessly and unscrupulously for short-term profit. In this sense, we are called to serve like Noah as shepherds of creation.

And part of this is, as said in the Letter to the Hebrews, "you may do his will, working among us that which is pleasing in his sight". Always think about what is good for creation, for animals and plants! In terms of lights and light bulbs in the house, when turning off technical implements, when you don't use them, when using cars, regarding legal conditions for industrial firms, international commitments in regards to climate politics and many more. Serving creation as shepherds is part of our mission as Christians.

When Helmut Thielicke took the crucial medication, he had the Crucified before his eyes. When life was granted him anew, it was on Good Friday. Hebrews 13 points out, that we experience peace through Jesus, the great Shepherd, and the blood of his eternal covenant. And the Easter Sunrise Service on Lake Ontario is a lasting sign for me: The message of the resurrected Christ shines as a powerful horizon and wants to draw the entire creation into the communion of the God of peace. Amen.