

Zion's Call Resounding in all Lands: "Behold your God" (Isaiah 40:9-11)

by Reinhold Pieper

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NOTE: Reinhold Pieper (1850-1920) was not only pastor of Central Illinois District congregations in Chatham and Riverton; from 1891 to 1914, he served as President and Professor at Concordia Theological Seminary in Springfield. May the translation of this sermon make a small contribution to the anniversary celebration of the seminary that spent the greater part of its 175 years in central Illinois (1846-2021; in Springfield 1875-1976). The sermon was written for the anniversary of a Lutheran school, but it could be modified for a church anniversary or a mission festival.

Dearly beloved festival participants in the Lord –

When a Christian congregation can celebrate the festival of the 40-year-long existence of its school, it has a high cause to appear with praise and thanks before the Lord its God. For a true Christian school is a valuable, noble treasure. It is the foundation, or, to use another figure, the *plant-school* of a congregation. In the installation and maintenance of a fruit garden one needs a nursery in which the young trees are brought up so they can be planted in the fruit-garden. So, in a Christian school the children are brought up in the fear and admonition of the Lord to be rightful and full-fledged members of the congregation. In it they are not only brought up to be good citizens of the state who in the fear of God are subject to the worldly authorities and are helpful to their neighbors, but also to be citizens of heaven who are blessed through faith in Christ Jesus. In this school a work is done on them that can happen in no other school, even if that school is capable of searching through the earth and the firmament of heaven and could ascertain the course of the sun, the moon, and the myriad of stars. Is it necessary to demonstrate this? I point out only the word of the psalmist: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom . . ." (Psalm 111:10) and the word of the apostle: "The world with its lusts passes away, but whoever does the will of God remains into eternity" (1 John 2:17)

But, my friends, today I want to direct your gaze not only to the past, not only to the blessings which God the Lord has given your congregation through your school, and to rouse you to heartfelt gratitude. Also – yes, indeed, more – I direct you to the future, and on the basis of the words of the text which has been read. This passage seems at first glance not to speak about the work that is done in a Christian school. Therefore it seems unsuitable for the festival today. Nevertheless, this is not so, if we take it up according to its context and content for a right understanding. It speaks of Zion and Jerusalem and contains an invitation or an acclamation to Zion. Zion should climb a high mountain and from there let its voice resound with might so that it may penetrate through the whole land, into all the cities of Judah.

Is this acclamation valid for you? Is it valid for this congregation, and in reference to its school and the work that is done in it? I say yes, and I want to try to show this. So now we turn to

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For:

1. *You are a preacher;*
2. *The Lord comes to rule over the strong;*
3. *So He might feed His flock as a Shepherd.*

1.

"Zion, you preacher, climb a high mountain" (v. 9a). So, my festival participants, sounds the call that the prophet Isaiah once directed to Zion 750 years before the New Testament era. The name "Zion" signifies at first "erected rock" or sheltering mountain. Then it denotes for the prophet the temple mountain at Jerusalem as the place where God dwells, or also the city of Jerusalem and its inhabitants. So in our text; for the prophet adds at the same time, "Jerusalem, you preacher, lift your voice with might" (v. 9b), and so he calls Zion also Jerusalem. There in His temple God dwelled. There in the Holy of Holies He revealed to His people His gracious presence in the cloud of light that moved in the air between the cherubim of the Ark of the Covenant.

Yet not only are the temple-mountain and the city of Jerusalem called Zion, but in the future, at the appearing of the promised Messiah, seeing, the prophets also call the kingdom of the Messiah – the church of the New Testament – Zion or the daughter of Zion. For example, Zechariah 9:9: "Daughter of Zion, rejoice greatly, and you, daughter of Jerusalem, shout with joy. See, your King comes to you"! In this call the church of the New Testament is named Zion. This church indeed consists of individual Christian congregations; to it belongs also your congregation. Consequently, the call is valid for this congregation, for what is valid for the whole is valid also for the individuals: "Zion, climb a high mountain."

But how should this congregation climb a high mountain? Is this not a strange invitation? Hardly, my friends; for it is spoken as a picture and should not be taken literally, but in another sense. It represents this congregation as a person who climbs on top of a mountain and from there should announce a message to those who live around the mountain, in the plain. Why should she climb up on the mountain? So her voice can be heard widely and all can receive the message. Therefore the prophet at once adds: "Jerusalem, lift up your voice with might!" That is, call out as loud as you can; announce the message with a very strong voice, that it may penetrate to those far away.

Why should she do this? The answer lies in the word “Preacher,” or, as the word can also be rendered, “Announcer of a good message” (v. 9b). From the high mountain she should preach down to men to announce a good and excellent message. We will stick with the picture in our text. There is a high mountain, around which are cities and towns filled with people. On the mountain stands the daughter of Zion. She sees one coming, Whose arrival has been announced to her for a long time, Who she has expected with yearning, with heartfelt longing. There she raises her voice, letting it penetrate through the cities and towns as a mighty trumpet; she lifts up her hand, points to the coming one, and calls, “Behold your God!” (v. 9c). Yes, “Behold your God” is the good message, which she lets resound widely from the high mountain through all lands. Because she does this, she is called a “preacher.”

“Behold your God.” That is a short sermon – but what a message! Participants in this festival, if I wanted further to lay out the content of this message, I would have to speak for an hour. But this isn’t necessary, for it has resounded here for 40 years. For what is the proper content of every sermon which has been delivered from this spot other than this message: “Behold your God!”? Yes, you were pointed to *your* God, your eyes were directed to the One Who, God from eternity, in time became man like us. As John wrote: ‘The Word became flesh and dwelled among us . . . full of grace and truth’ (John 1:14). This One made the blind to see. He raised the dead. He died there on the cross, yet is risen from the dead to sit at the right hand of God and reign over everything in heaven and earth. This One is coming again in divine glory. He redeemed the sinful world with His blood, the blood of God. He will judge at the end of days.

“Behold your God!” – the same One of whom Peter confessed, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16), to whom Thomas said, “My Lord and my God” (John 20:28), and of whom all of you as with one voice confess: “I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father in eternity and also true Man, born of the virgin Mary, is my Lord,” Whom all of you, this whole congregation, have confessed for the past 40 years. There you have a true Zion, as if standing on a high mountain and shouting widely to its surroundings with might, to all inhabitants of this great city, who in so many ways are like godless Nineveh: “See, behold Jesus the Crucified and Risen One. He is your God, your Savior. He comes to you. Receive Him, believe in Him!”

But this has also happened in your Christian school as long as it has existed. Its founding 40 years ago and its existence until today is for this city and its surroundings a pointer to the eternal, true God and to the One He has sent, Jesus Christ. The teachers who have had positions here, who have taught here, have instructed the children also in many secular subjects for this life, but above all they have instructed them in the Word of God, in the Gospel, that has Christ as its content. Their whole instruction, since it is Christian, had as its one proper content the good message for the children: See, this is your God, who loved you, redeemed you, bought you with His own blood – your Savior, who will make you blessed, in whom alone is

salvation! So your congregation and school stands there, as if on a high mountain and lets the good message resound widely: “Behold your God!”

Should she perhaps descend from this mountain? Should her good message no longer resound in and from her? Should she become like the schools in which this blessing-imparting message is not announced, and cannot be announced? Then the light would turn to darkness; then you would be a poor congregation, no longer a fine preacher, but you would become a false prophetess. Therefore I call to you, a daughter of Zion, with the prophet in our text: “Lift up your voice with might!” As in the past, so also in the future, let your voice resound widely also through your school; lift yourself in rejuvenated might and fear not; say to the cities of Judah, all the cities of the nation and in the whole land: “Behold your God!” Indeed, a congregation that never tires in the announcement of this message also through its school stands as a preacher of this message near and far, in the second place because the Lord comes against the strong.

2.

“Behold, the Lord comes against the strong!” the prophet furthermore calls. Who comes mightily, or, as I have rendered the words here, against the strong (v. 10a)? The Lord Jehovah; and by this is meant the same Person Who was pointed out earlier with the call, “Behold your God!” This Lord and God comes against the strong.

Who is this strong one? John gives us the answer in the words, “For this purpose the Son of God appeared, that He might destroy the works of the devil” (1 John 3:8) and one of the other apostles in the words, “Now as the children have flesh and blood, in like manner He became a participant (of flesh and blood) so that through death He might take the might of the one who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and redeem those who through the fear of death were obligated to spend their whole lives as slaves” (Hebrews 2:14-15).

Yes, the devil is the armed strong one against whom Christ came and continually comes. Did He not stand there in the desert with him on the battlefield? Did He not make healthy all who were overcome by the devil? Before His words must not the unclean spirits tremble and flee? And against these strong ones doesn't He fight today at every place through His Word where it is preached and taught in church and school? And this strong one does not celebrate; he goes around like a roaring lion, and seeks who he might devour, old and young – especially the young. Aren't the children and teenagers, particularly in this great city, especially exposed to his allurements and temptations? Aren't the doors of the houses open in which the lust of the flesh and of the eyes and other voices are enjoyed, in which Satan opens his net wide open? That is why the Lord always comes against the strong.

But He comes and does not fight in vain; for “His arm will prevail.” So announces the prophet (v. 10a). With His arm, that is, with His might, He will overcome the strong one and prevail over him. He is almighty not alone as God, but also as Man; to Him has been given all power in heaven and on earth. He prevailed over him, while He seemed to be totally inferior to him; for through His death He took the might of the one who had the power of death, that is, the devil. He has prevailed over him through His Word as He wandered about here on earth in humility, in which He cast out the devil; and He triumphs over him today through His Word.

Is this not so? Look at the Christian church since its founding on the first New Testament Pentecost until the most recent time! How did this founding happen? How is it preserved and extended? Only through the Word, the preaching of the Gospel. Neither the scholars with their wisdom nor the kings and rulers with their might could stand against Him. The might of His word has shown itself unwithstandable to innumerable people; unstoppably, He has widened the borders of His kingdom. The promises in Psalm 72 are fulfilled: “He will prevail from one sea to another and from the river to the end of the world. Before Him those in the desert will bow, and His enemies will eat dirt. The kings as far as the sea and in the islands will bring gifts” (vv. 9-10a). The church, the kingdom of Christ, extends to the most distant island of the sea. Christ’s victory sign, the cross, is erected in the largest cities and on the widest plains, under the palm trees of India and in icy Greenland and Alaska. Everywhere His arm rules over the strong.

And this governance comes about no less through the Word that is taught in Christian schools than through that which is preached in the churches. What a sight, my friends, as the children, like after Christ royal entry into Jerusalem, joyously sing to Him in the temple, “Hosanna to the Son of David”! (Matthew 21:9). Yet does not the same thing happen still today in every Christian school when the children who have been instructed in His Word confess their faith and let their songs resound to His praise? Through this the word always proves itself to be true: “Out of the mouth of under-aged and sucklings you have prepared praise” (Psalm 8:2). Every child who has come to the knowledge of his Savior, believes in Him and praises Him through word and deed, is a victory the Lord has achieved over the strong one; for He has rescued him from the service of darkness and has transferred him into His kingdom, in which he serves Him.

“See, His reward is with Him and His retaliation” or His work “is before Him” (Isaiah 40:10b). So the prophet continues and points to the fulfillment of the prophecy that the Lord has given His Zion. He has promised that the head of the snake should be destroyed, and it came to pass. Satan’s might was taken from him. God had promised Abraham that through his Seed all the families of the earth should be blessed; and this promise was fulfilled. The blessing acquired by Christ, salvation, is announced in all tongues and languages, and all who believe in it will have part in it. Yes, Zion, the church, has taken part in the fullness of the blessings among all the pagan people who have entered the church through the preaching of the Gospel.

Time does not permit me to go into this further. I point out only the blessing and the reward which the Lord has given our Lutheran church in this city especially through the school. Hasn't the growth of our church kept pace with the growth of this city? And hasn't this happened particularly through the school? In this city one finds about 40, in the city and surrounding area put together over 80 congregations, and about 100 teachers work in the schools of the city. And those schools have shown themselves as mission schools. Things have been done very wisely here. The establishment of a Christian school was usually considered first in a new area, so that a congregation would be gathered. So one school after another arose, and one congregation after another, some large schools and large congregations. In these are between 60,000 and 65,000 souls who confess the Lord. They are the blessing and the reward together. They are the fruit of the mighty Word, its victory over the strong one.

In the picture of our text, I say: They are the redeemed, who He leads with Him and allows to go before Him as a shepherd does with His flock. What a picture, what a vision, my dear festival participants! About 65,000 people, moving on before the Lord, over whom He rules through His Word, the scepter of His grace, and whom He will lead – all of them, great and small – into the kingdom of His glory. All, a fruit of His victory over the strong one, should praise the might of His grace both here and there.

But, my friends, I must turn to the last part of our text, to the magnificent work which the text says the Lord wants to do for all.

3.

The last part of our text reads: "He will feed His flock as a shepherd; He will gather the lambs in His arms and in His bosom bear them and lead the mother sheep" (v. 11). The Lord appears according to the words of verse 10 as a mighty ruler; according to the words of this verse, He appears in the form of a shepherd feeding his flock. The ones He took from the strong one through fighting and victory, who He saved and freed by His might, who were redeemed by Him, are His flock, His sheep. They are the ones He feeds on the green pastures of His Word. He shelters them in the presence of the crowd, in the attacks and tests of the hellish wolf.

These are the ones before whom He goes, who He leads and conducts on a right road. Having seen that, David had already sung in Psalm 23: "The Lord is my shepherd; I will lack nothing. He feeds me on a green pasture and leads me to fresh water. He quickens my soul; He leads me on right paths for His name's sake. And even though I walk in the dark valley, I fear no misfortune; for You are with me, Your rod and staff comfort me" (vv. 1-4). He himself said in John 10: "I have still other sheep, who are not of this fold. And I must bring them, and they will hear my voice; and there will be one flock and one shepherd . . . And I give them eternal life . . . no one can snatch them from my Father's hand" (vv. 16, 28, 29).

And how lovely is the picture shown in the key words of our text! A flock consists of mother-sheep and small lambs, old and young. The stragglers especially need carefulness and caring; and He, the Great Shepherd, in full moderation lets them do less than their share. He not only feeds the whole flock in common, but He attends to the individuals with especial care. He gathers in His arms the tender lambs who need special nursing and bears them in his bosom, and He leads the suckling sheep, as it is properly said, gently, in a tender way. Is that not a lovely overall picture: this shepherd, with the lambs gathered in his arms and leaning on his bosom, gently leading the mother sheep? What love, what solicitude is thus shown!

Yet this delightful picture is not new and unfamiliar to you. You have had it before your eyes for 40 years, and you have it before your eyes now. The lambs whom the Good Shepherd gathers in His arms and has drawn to His bosom, aren't these especially the children He, in your school, has fed on the pastures of His Word; who He through His Shepherd's voice, the Gospel, has gathered in His rescuing arms and drawn to His bosom? Indeed, they are His lambs. For He has bought them with His own blood shed on Golgotha. In holy Baptism, He washed them clean from their sins. And through His Word He gathers them around Himself. And likewise has He gently led the mother sheep, no matter whether we understand these to be the children's parents who are advanced in knowledge, or teachers and preachers who nourish the children with the reasonable, pure milk of the Word, the latter of whom with their foibles need so very much guidance and care in their difficult positions. So greatly, so marvelously has the Lord acted in and through your school – such love, such care has He shown to these, your children, and to you yourselves.

When you hold this picture dear and recognize in it how great the Good Shepherd has been to you, as He has loved the children, then must your heart not overflow with thankfulness? Must you not be moved to the holy promise: our school, to which the Lord has done and still does such great and marvelous things, in which He takes our children to His bosom, we will preserve and maintain as our most valuable jewel. We should support and further it, no matter how great the sacrifice. It should resound in the school and out from here as from a high mountain: "Behold your God!" Jesus Christ, true God, born from the Father in eternity, and also true Man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord. He has defeated the strong one and rules over him. He feeds His redeemed as His flock, as if He were a shepherd. He gathers the lambs in His arms, draws them to His bosom, and gently leads the mother-sheep. He does not let them perish, but gives them eternal life, who He eternally feeds and leads to living water-springs. When He had done and continually does such great things for your children in the school, will it not be the most valuable earthly treasure which you have?

Should you then be cold, having no love for it? No, your Shepherd's love and loyalty to the lambs kindles you with all love and care for your Christian school so that, when He comes some day, and the sheep are separated from the goats, you with your young children placed to His right, can say to Him: "See, here we are, and the children You have given us; no one is lost." So may He govern us, the true God and true Shepherd, for His own dear sake!