**Sermon January 1, 2017**

**Dear Congregation,**

**The sermon text for today is also the chosen bible verse for the New Year 2017 that will accompany is through the year. In Ezekiel 36:26 it reads: God says: “A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.”**

**Our human heart beats daily about hundred thousand times. It pumps about seven thousand liters of blood through our body. First it nurtures the coronary arteries and tissues and then the whole organism. The heart experiences everything we do: Stress, vacation, youth and aging, happiness and suffering. And at the same time it works tirelessly for many decades. Often we take this for granted. Only when the heart does not function as well, we realize what a precious gift God has given us. Today medicine has come so far that if we have a malfunctioning heart, another heart can be transplanted with quite a good success rate.**

**Our bible verse for 2017 also talks about a certain kind of heart transplantation. The heart that Ezekiel talks about is a symbol for the total life of a person. The heart is not only a muscle that pumps blood through the veins. The heart is the epitome for courage, for soul and for love. And so it can happen that the heart is sick. Yes, today we might even have the impression that not only individual persons, but all of humanity has become a chronically ill heart patient. When the heart changes, then the whole human being changes. Whoever has a joyful heart, that person can also laugh with all their heart. Whose heart is broken, that person’s life becomes very heavy. A person whose heart has become hard like stone makes the person lack compassion and blind for God’s mercy and grace.**

**Do you know the fairy tale of Wilhelm Hauff "The cold heart?” Peter, a young coal miner in the black forest was tired of his life in poverty. He felt inferior and not respected, and he hardly earned any money with his hard and dirty work. So he is finally being seduced by the mighty and evil forest Spirit “Hollander Michel” to give him his heart. Instead he receives a stone heart implanted into his body. From that moment on everything seems to improve. He becomes rich, marries a young beautiful woman and lives the good life. Only: He is not doing well. With his heart of stone he cannot feel anything anymore. A voice tells him that this is a good thing: Otherwise he would give away the money that he earns to the poor! And so he does not know compassion anymore. Even his old mother he only gives small amounts of money, and later is mad that he has given her anything at all. He does not know love anymore. But after a while he also notices: He does not know joy anymore. In the past he was able to delight in small things: A beautiful flower, a magnificent sunset, a gathering with friends. But now, that’s over with. The cold stony heart does not know emotions like those. Only greed for money and obsession with himself. And anger and rage that his wife once in a while gives a little money to a person in need. In his rage, he beats his wife to death. And then he starts thinking. Regret or compassion he still cannot feel – but he notices: something is wrong with his life.**

**A cold heart of stone – nobody can live with that. Not truly living in the fullest sense of the word. As feelings are part of life. And often that includes moment of pain and suffering – and on the other hand also the experience of joy.**

**And yet some people seem to live with such a heart of stone. And thus we have expressions like “He has a heart of stone”. “She is cold blooded”. When we use expressions like these we mean most of all: This person is not able to love or have any compassion for others. He only thinks of himself. And this is how the prophet Ezekiel describes the Israelites who live in Babylon after the destruction of the city: “God says: our hearts are made of stone. You don’t have love for your neighbors. And love for God that is closely connected with love of neighbor does not exist anymore. Everybody’s heart is cold and hard like stone. There is no hope, is there?**

**The wonderful that I can tell us this morning based on the prophet Ezekiel is, that God our creator is offering us a heart transplant. And this will give to us a new of life. We will receive a new heart!**

**In our fairy tale Peter manages by tricking the evil forest Spirit so that he got his real heart back. And he is being rewarded: His wife comes back to life, and from now on he lives a kind life, he is being respected and he has a decent income. Not too much money, but also not too little. So far the fairy tale.**

**But what about real life? How is it when people actually have a hardened heart like this? And: Am I not sometimes one of them? Sometimes I think that I cannot let all this suffering of others that I hear about or see close to me. My heart is not always as loving as I wish. What can I do?**

**Martin Luther writes an important sentence that we should not forget in this context. He says:** “**Whatever your heart clings to and confides in, that is really your God”. What does our heart cling to? That is a question Ezekiel is indirectly asking us.**

**But before we go further, let’s look at the historical context in which Ezekiel makes his statements. In the year 597 before Christ Jerusalem is being conquered and Israel’s King Joachin and 30,000 Israelites are being captured and brought to Babylon, which is in today’s Iraq. Ezekiel was in the first group of people that were captured. He describes how God called him as a prophet 5 years into the exile experience. He becomes the great prophet during the exile in Babylon. The first chapters of the book Ezekiel contain many words of judgement against Jerusalem, which destruction Ezekiel predicts, together with mourning songs, admonitions and requests of Israel to repent and to change their ways.**

**When 10 years after the deportation in 587 the city of Jerusalem and the temple as God’s house get destroyed, Ezekiel learns about it from country men who were able to escape the destruction. The news of Jerusalem’s destruction meant a change in Ezekiel’s message. And this change begins in chapter 33-39, and our text today is written in the middle, in chapter 36. Here Ezekiel breaks away from the notion that God lives only in the temple in Jerusalem and he broadens the Old Testament theology as it existed before. Ezekiel says: “No, God is everywhere, not just in the temple. And God is there and available for all people. And every person is responsible for their own life. The religious rituals are no longer bound to the temple, but they receive new meaning through the attitude, through the Spirit of the person who performs them. Ezekiel’s teaching is about an inner renewal. His name means “God makes strong”.**

**We might wonder how the Israelites of his time received Ezekiel’s message.**

**It could not have been more difficult for the people of Israel at the time: For ten years they lived in exile, far from home, oppressed by strangers, apparently forsaken by their God; the holiest place, the temple in Jerusalem where God according to their faith resided had been destroyed. What did they do with those words: “A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh?” Did the Israelites 2600 years ago trust the words of God, when everything around them spoke against this so-called message of salvation, or have most of them closed their ears as they faced such hard realities? We don’t know.**

**What we do know is that for more than two and a half thousand years, generations of people of the Old Testament and of the New Testament have been confronted with this text.**

**Words of salvation, God’s promise? - And if we look at ourselves in today’s world? The world is filled with masses of refugees, many people live in exile, and we have many armed conflicts, power struggles and oppression.**

**And many of us in the Western world live in some ways in an inner exile. We are often being other-directed by the media and the expectations of society. Often we are not home anymore within ourselves, but we are internally fleeing from others and from ourselves. As a consequence many people lose a sense of values. They lack orientation and live with much anxiety. Many feel like God is far away, if he still exists, just as the Israelites in exile in Iraq. Many of us had their temple of childhood faith destroyed and we struggle internally to find our way. Our hearts are anxious, insecure, without orientation and grow cold…**

**We remember Luther’s words: “Whatever your heart clings to and confides in, that is really your God”. What does our heart cling to? What rips our heart in two? What reaches our heart and what moves our heart? Does it move or has it hardened? Does our heart cling to money, to news about the stock exchange and thus hardens? Is this our God? Does our heart hang onto success and our career above all? Is this our God? Is our heart hardening that way? Or is our heart tied to an absolute conviction, or tied to ourselves? An ego trip that leads us to fanatic behavior, intolerance and exclusion of others. Do we want to be our own God or is there nothing anymore that we believe in? Do we experience a heart of stone? Or do we have the feeling that everything is pretty OK with our heart?**

**“A new heart!” says Ezekiel. How is that even possible? -we might ask. Because I know how hard it is to change even small habits. And how even more so to start a new beginning in the small and large areas of our life. Concerned people in church and society are warning: “If we don’t completely change our thinking, the future looks dark for future generations”! A doctor says to a patient: “You won’t get around needing a transplant”. Desperate parents say: “Our child is so defiant and listens to nobody!” Our navigator says: “Please, turn around”. I must have been heading in the wrong direction.**

**Clear words – what they have in common is that all ask that soon something fundamental needs to change. And that this change might be lifesaving. The prophet Ezekiel was called to speak such clear words in the name of God as well. Not an easy task! Especially when the people of God he talks to are described as having “stubborn faces and stone hearts” (Ezekiel 2:4)**

**Yes, this is a problem. We can tell ourselves or even think for a long time: “You need to change your life”. Yet why don’t we humans not do it? We might not know everything there is to know, but we know definitely enough. We know that it is important to keep certain boundaries, that it is important to act justly, and that we are “to love God and our neighbor as ourselves” (Luke 10:27)**

**We know all of that, but we also know the cry of desperation that Paul expressed by saying: “The good that I want to do, I am not doing… woe me, I am lost…” It is after all not enough if we want change with our head.**

**And then there is also the experience of spiritual blindness. The bible talks about such blindness for God and for God’s will and his grace as “sin”.**

**At this point I would like to share a part of a speech of our current Pope Franziskus that he held in Manila in 2015. He spoke at the time in front of thousands of young people, and he described the illness of spiritual and mental hardening of the heart, as it exists especially in the rich countries in our world. He spoke the following words: “Brothers and Sisters in Christ. This is our identity. God has chosen us for a certain purpose and has blessed us: to be holy and blameless in his sight (Ephesians 1:4). God has chosen us – each one of us- so that we will be witnesses of his truth and his justice. He created this world as a beautiful garden and entrusted us with its care. But because of our sin we humans have distorted its natural beauty; and because of our sin we humans have also destroyed the unity and beauty of our human family and we created society structures that allow for poverty, lack of education and corruption to continue.**

**Sometimes when we see all around us struggles, difficulties and injustice, we are tempted to give up. It seems as if the promises of God’s word are null and void, as if they are unrealistic. And yet the bible tells us that the great danger to God’s plan for us has always been the lies. The devil is the father of all lies. And often he hides his traps behind the appearance of being cultured, behind the temptation “wanting to be modern” and “just as everybody else”. He distracts us with bates of fast lived enjoyments and superficial ways of using our time. And thus we waste our God given gifts in occupying our mind with chatter. We waste our money for games and drinks and start spinning around ourselves. We forget to remain focused on those things that really matter. We forget, to remain in our inner heart children of God. For children have, as Jesus told us, their own wisdom, that is not the wisdom of the world. That is why the message of the child Jesus is so important. He reaches us in our inner heart. He reminds us of our identity and of that which we are called to as God’s family.”**

**So far Pope Franziskus. He describes what he understands as sin and as the hardening of the heart. And he implies that when we allow to be touched by the fate of other people, when we see ourselves as part of God’s family, then we receive in some way a new identity, and we quasi receive a heart transplant through God.**

**And this is similar to what Ezekiel talks about when he describes God’s promise: “A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.”**

**Sin can also be described as a blindness, most of all for one’s self, for one’s own situation. Sin is often invisible for the sinner. We humans sin against God not, because we in any case want to. We are just blind and do not even know that we are. Our heart is hardened, and we don’t even know.**

**The child book character “the little prince” says “Only the heart can see well, the essence is hidden from the eyes.” In some way this means: If we had a good heart, we could also see well. When our receiving organ, the heart, is not receptive to God’s reality, we do sin. The problem is: We don’t even know that something in us is hardened.**

**In the New Testament Jesus dealt with the Pharisees. They especially believed themselves to be the enlightened ones, while Jesus accused them of blindness. He said: “If you were blind, you did not have sin; yet because you say: we are the ones seeing, your sin remains (John 9:41).” The problem is: We cannot make ourselves see. We need an intervention from the outside. We need to taste and get to know who God is and that we wants only the best for us!**

**I want to illustrate this with an example: Can you describe the taste of honey? Surely you can try, and yet you remain on the surface. Honey is a dense and sticky fluid. And yet only when the sweet taste of honey unfolds on my own tongue, can I truly understand. And this is how it is with God and God’s word. I need to experience it in order to have it change my life.**

**Ezekiel described at the beginning of his book the following experience: “**

**He said to me, O mortal, eat what is offered to you; eat this scroll, and go, speak to the house of Israel. 2 So I opened my mouth, and he gave me the scroll to eat. 3 He said to me, Mortal, eat this scroll that I give you and fill your stomach with it. Then I ate it; and in my mouth it was as sweet as honey. (Ezekiel 3: 1-3)**

**These verses have been the reason why in the old Israel once the children turned six and came to school, the teachers on the first day of school took the small chalk boards of the children and put honey all around them until the boards were all sticky. Honey was an image for God’s grace. It was the best that one could get back then. Afterwards the teacher asked his students to lick the honey off the boards. While they did so, he quoted the verse from the book of Ezekiel: “May God’s words be as sweet as the honey in your mouth!”**

**God himself is the one who gifts us with a new heart, who removes the blindness from the eyes of our hearts, and who lets us taste his grace that is as sweet as honey. And yet this is only possible as the son of God made his way to us. It was the sin and blindness of us humans that finally lead to him being crucified. And yet just at that moment at the cross, when everything seemed to become dark, a turning point happened. From that moment on we recognized how God truly is. One of the first whose heart recognized this was a Roman soldier who exclaimed; ‘This man was really God’s son!”**

**As Christians we have received a new heart. A heart that can taste and see God’s grace. And so that we don’t forget, we are invited by Jesus today in this service and again and again in this New Year, to come to his table and “taste and see how friendly God is!”**

**May we allow God to open our eyes again and again and take away our hardened and cold heart and replace it with a new heart and a new Spirit within us.**

**Amen**

**Let us pray: We are grateful, that you, God, have not given us what we deserve, but that you want to give us your Spirit and a new heart! We thank you for your promise. Help us to trust the beating of this your new heart within us, so that we dare to make courageous new steps with confidence. Show us the areas where you want us to practice, so we can look away from ourselves and learn compassion and share others’ lives. Accompany us with your Spirit in our daily life. And comfort us when we get afraid that we are walking on our own. For you are with us. Amen**