

**Sermon Text: Hebrews 13**  
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**Preached at Predigerseminar, Lutherstadt Wittenberg**  
**On the occasion of the baptisms of Ina Markhoff and Frieder Vibrans**

*The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.*

*Amen*

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

We have a reason to rejoice: Frieder Vibrans und Ina Markgraf will be baptized.

They will be baptized:

in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

-- in the name of the God, spreading his arms above them and protecting them like a good father.

-- in the name of the Lord, standing by their side like a careful brother,

-- in the name of God, sending his spirit into their hearts and giving them strength again and again – strength for life and for faith.

They have joy in their baptism: God says YES to them, before they can do anything.

They have joy in their baptism: That they find a home within the fellowship of those who trust in God.

They will take words with them along the way, tried and true words of life 's wisdom, reminding them of this God and his closeness.

For you, Frieder: *Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.*

And for you, Ina: *You love everything that is and abhor nothing which you have made.*

Two sentences of assurance.

Shortly, we will baptize these two –so what can happen now?

There are people who get baptized just so that nothing will happen.

So that they stay healthy and protected. So that they do not get into trouble.

Baptism, becomes a means of insurance against the terrible things in life.

Baptism: so that nothing happens. A lovely thought- if it were not for the church year and today 's sermon text.

Baptism: so that nothing happens. Apparently, it isn 't that simple.

**We are baptizing in the middle of Lent.**

We think of the suffering and dying of Jesus Christ.

He had been baptized too. But he was not protected from animosity, from pain, from violence, from death. We have his story before our eyes. We baptize during a time in which the cross stands in the center and, with that, the whole misery of the world, all the injustice and guilt, all the violence and pain, and all the sickness and death.

The baptized Jesus dives in, into all this misery of the world.

*And now the sermon text:*

In the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of the letter to the Hebrews we read:

***13 Therefore let us go forth to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured.***

***14 For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city which is to come.***

Dear sisters and brothers,

to trust God and be baptized then does **not** mean:

### **Nothing can happen to me.**

Our baptism does not mean:

That we pass by the difficulties of life.

You have experienced it already, Frieder, and it is a part of your life, Ina, just the way it happens to each of us.

We cannot pass by the difficulties, the sorrow and the pain of life.

The season of Lent makes this clear again and again.

Moreover, to trust in God means:

We reckon with the fact: We have no lasting city.

Christians do not have any delusions.

Christian faith is a realistic guiding principle for life.

Christian faith does not say: Everything will be good. Christian faith does not mean: Nothing will happen to me.

No, whoever relies on God knows: We cannot have complete protection. Although we would like that.

But it is not possible. We have no lasting city here.

But what might it mean: We have no lasting city here.

The Letter to the Hebrews cites some examples at the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> Chapter :

#### **It 's about a home.**

We can 't just assume we will have a home.

We can 't just assume that we will be safe in our trusty home and in our family.

How many people are in flight? Migration is a major topic of our time. How many people have lost their homes? How many people had to leave their familiar surroundings, their family that offered them security? The generation of war times knows so much of it. And the refugees are experiencing it today.

And in our land, people lose their apartments and their houses, because they have no work and can no longer pay for everything. People travel great distances –to get jobs. It is very important to have a home, but that 's not the assurance that carries us through life. We need something within us which can sustain us if we lose our home.

And then **the prisoners** are mentioned. No, we cannot just assume everybody will be free. It is not self-evident that we are able to move freely, that we are able to express ourselves freely.

We remember how it was, when things were completely different.

And how many people experience not being free in their families, how many people can hardly move in their job situations, for many, how many face constant pressure that takes their breath away. And how many people can 't move, are not able to travel because they have no money. To have liberty is very important, but it is not outward liberty that sustains life. We need something to sustain us, just when our freedom is in danger

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And then there is the issue of money. Of course! We cannot just assume we will have money, that our livelihood is guaranteed. How quickly that can pass. How precarious are the lives of those who only rely on money.

As are the lives of those who appear to have lots of money. Do not rely upon that.

*“You fool, they will ask for your soul in this night!”* says God, to the rich grain farmer.

To have money is important. And very reassuring.

But it is not able to sustain our life.

We need something to sustain us when our possessions are gone.

And then we find something special and interesting in our chapter of the Hebrews letter:

There is mention of rituals, of religious customs.

*“For it is a good thing for the heart to be strengthened by grace, and not by regulations about food.”*

Think about that; your rituals, your religious forms, your church practices are not guarantees and they are not the content of your faith. Do not rely on all that.

Your usual rituals are not more important than God, not more important than faith.

We learned it during the fusion process with the Thuringian church.

Some of us thought: When our church is no longer the way we have known it, our faith will be lost.

This is a big mistake. To the contrary: The church must be renewed in order to remain the place of our faith.

We need the outer form of the church, we need solid structures to live out our faith, but this form and these structures are not able to sustain life. We need something sustaining us when the forms of faith and the shape of the church change.

For we have no lasting city here. We come back to this truth: We have no lasting city here. Not family. Not health. Not work. Not friends.

The report of the illness of Walter Jens moved me profoundly. A man who lived from his language, who helped many people through his language – most recently with his wonderful translation of texts from the Bible. This man can no longer hear anything and is not able to make any understandable sound and has lost his mental orientation.

We have no lasting city here.

Therefore: Rely upon God and do not rely upon anything else. This is the message. There is not the security that we may desire. But this is the assurance of being sustained in life and in death, no matter what else happens.

We have no lasting city here – this also means:

Go out of the town to Christ at the gate again and again. Stand at his side, outside. That means, according to the Hebrews letter: **Be thankful for everything** which God has given you.

In gratitude accept the town, the security, the safety God gives you as lodging and as home. But do not forget – all this is not automatic and therefore do not forget those who do not have these things.

Therefore: *remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them.*

*Those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured.*

*Do not neglect to show hospitality, for by doing that, some have entertained angels without knowing it... Keep your lives free from the love of money... for the Lord has said, I will never leave you.” Such is the commentary in the Hebrews letter.*

Therefore:

You who are free do not forget those who are bound.

You who have a home, do not forget those who are outside.

You who have money, do not forget those who have no money and are without income.

You who have friends and families, do not forget those who are lonely.

And: you who are at home in the congregation, in worship, and in the structures of faith, do not forget those who are outside, for whom everything is strange, who have it tough to find their place in the congregation and in the worship service.

We have no lasting city here, but we seek the city which is to come.

Dear sisters and brothers,  
this is the realism of faith. I rely on God, and for that reason, I can see things as they are. I rely on God - therefore I do not build my life on things that pass away.  
I rely on God –therefore I do not build on my faith, on my ability to be steadfast to God, but I believe he will lift me up from my unbelief.

I rely upon God –therefore I can be there for others. For those outside of the gate.

This is the double freedom of faith:

A Christian is free from things.

That's what baptism is about. We belong to God and we do not belong to things and to forces which bind us and captivate, we do not belong to things which give us an apparent security.

We have as if we have not - as Paul once described it.

It is not so simple. Especially when something is pulling on our heart. And yet we know: We bind our hearts again and again. To money, to our partner or to our own fitness or to a car or to our job or ... or ... each one of you knows what your own danger is. But nevertheless, baptism remains effective.

We cannot undo baptism. God's YES sticks.

We belong to God, we do not belong to things. That is true, even if we behave differently.

This is the first freedom. **We are free of things.**

To have as if we have not.

For we have no lasting city here.

And from that stems the second freedom. **Freedom for others.**

We have the freedom to go out from the 'lasting city', from our lasting habits, from our own security, to be there for others. For we seek the city which is to come.

And the distinguishing characteristic of the city which is to come, is trust in God and neighbourly love.

I wish the two of you, whom we will baptize shortly, and I wish for all of us, the experience of this double freedom over and over again.

The experience of the freedom from things which chain us and the freedom for the other, the freedom for others.

For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city which is to come.

And may the peace of God, which is greater than our understanding, preserve our hearts and our minds in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen