

A New Chapter in World History

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on December 4, 1994, the Second Sunday in Advent. Scripture Lessons: Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 1:68-79; Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-6.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

When I was a child I enjoyed fairy tales - Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, Rumpelstiltskin, Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs and many, many more. Fairy tales nearly always begin with, "Once upon a time." But fairy tales don't take place in time. They take place in a never, never land beyond time. No one ever asks if Snow White live before, after, or during the Revolutionary War? We don't ask those questions because fairy tales don't take place in history. But the Gospel is not a fairy tale. The story of Jesus took place in history.

There've always been people who put the gospel in the category of fairy tales. The Gospel does contain stories that sound like fairy tales. For example, in the fairy tale Prince Charming kisses Snow White and awakens her from the sleep of death. The gospel tells us that when Jesus died, the sun stopped shining, the earth quaked, and an ancient curse that condemned all of us to endless death was broken. This is what you expect to hear in fairy tales. But the gospel is not a fairy tale.

Luke wants to underline that the events the gospel tells us about took place in history. We may question whether everything happened exactly as the gospels describe but the Christian faith proclaims that the central events of which the Gospel speaks happened to particular people, at a particular place, and at a particular time. Luke, of all the Gospel writers, takes great pains to locate the story of Jesus in the context of world history. Look at the elaborate way Luke

introduces the story of John the Baptist.

"In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, in the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness."

This is Luke's way of asserting the world relevance of Christianity. The events of the Gospel take place, not in a never, never land but in the context of emperors, governors.

Tiberius was the second Roman Emperor, the first being Augustus Caesar.

Most historians say that Tiberius began his fifteenth year in A.D. 27. During his

reign the civilized world enjoyed unprecedented peace known as the Pax Romana.

Military engineers built a vast system of roads throughout the empire some of

which have lasted until this day. Valleys were filled in. Mountains and hills were

brought low. Crooked roads were made straight. Rough roads were smoothed. *The Roman Empire actually prepared the way of the Lord.*

These Roman roads took Luke and Paul and many other Christian missionaries to

very edges of the civilized world with the message of salvation that comes to us

in Jesus Christ.

Notice, also, that

These early Christians believed that God wanted "all flesh to see the salvation of God". Not just Jews, but Romans, Greeks, barbarians, men and women, slave and free; and not just good men and women, but sinful, fallen men and women in their rebellion and disobedience. "All flesh shall see the salvation of God."

John Calvin wrote, "this salvation would not be at all obscure, nor only tasted by a few (men), but radiant, and shared by all."

Now, do you see how this relates to us today? The gospel is for the whole world, not just for Christians, and the gospel is to be proclaimed to the entire world. The Church is not like some club for like minded people. The Church is a missionary society whose sole purpose is break down all the barriers that keep all

people, everywhere from seeing the salvation of God that comes to us in Jesus Christ. Luke believed that the gospel is for the whole world, Africans, Asians, Europeans and Americans. That's why he sets the gospel in the context of world history. God, the living God, the One who came to us in Jesus wants all flesh to see the salvation of God. ~~The same Spirit who inspired John the Baptist "gives us courage to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior" (Brief Statement of Faith).~~

In a pluralistic world which contains many kinds of people and many kinds of religious faith ~~God~~ ^{God} wants all people to see the salvation of Christ which has appeared in Jesus Christ. The Gospel is not only for all people, it addresses all world religions to turn to God through Jesus Christ.

I respect Moslems. They're often maligned as devious terrorists and radicals. But the religion of Mohammed has produced some remarkable men and women. Christians and Moslems can work together for peace and justice and righteousness. We both believe that God is One. We both believe in the Old Testament prophets. We both believe that Jesus was born of a Virgin. We both believe that Jesus ascended into heaven. But, I as a Christian, also want to persuade Moslems that the God of Ishmael, their ancestor, came to us in the life Jesus who began his public ministry during the reign of Tiberius Caesar.

Jews have been horribly persecuted by Christians for 2000 years. Christian Germany largely turned it's head when Hitler and the Nazi's murdered 6,000,000 Jews. I've been spiritually moved by the testimony of religious Jews like Elie

Wiesel, Victor Frankel and Martin Buber. The stories of the Hasidim are marvelous and wonderful testimonies to faith in the God of Abraham. But I very much would like to persuade Jews that the God of Abraham has come to them in the person of Jesus Christ.

Most of us have **neighbors** who don't gather to hear the Word of God preached and the sacraments celebrated. Many of these people are good people, law-abiding people, moral people - who don't see the importance of being a part of a community of faith. They often feel that religious faith is in the realm of feeling and opinion and not in the realm of fact and truth. Belief in Christ, for them, is a matter of taste. And yet I really have a deep longing that my neighbors see the salvation of God who comes to us in Jesus Christ. I want to do all I can to remove all the barriers that keep my neighbors from believing in Christ within the context of the Christian Church.

Most of us have intelligent, well-meaning friends we believe to be fundamentally mistaken about politics, educational policy, or even the designated hitter rule in baseball. We often don't hesitate to tell them that we think they're wrong. Hopefully we do this with civility. We try to be polite and respect to them as human beings. And we certainly don't want to force our beliefs on them by law or by intimidation. Why should our faith in Christ be any different? Why should we not try to do all we can to persuade our children, our friends and neighbors, our communities, our nation and the whole world that God has come to us in the person of Jesus Christ and that through his life, death and resurrection God wants all

flesh to see God's salvation.

Does this mean that God condemns to hell everyone who doesn't believe in Jesus or who is unable to believe or who no longer believe? No! John the Baptist proclaimed that the day is coming when all flesh shall see the salvation of God. Christians have confidence in the love and grace and power of God to open the eyes of all to see salvation in and through Christ.

The Word of God came to John the Baptist and the word of God comes to us who are living in the second year of the Clinton presidency, in the closing months of Governor Casey's administration, Pope John Paul II being pope, and Harold Gray, Mayor of Oxford. God's Word comes to us in the context of our own history, calling us to prepare the way for the coming Lord. God has commissioned us to preach the gospel, to share our faith, to send missionaries throughout the world, to tell the story of the God who loves in freedom, the living God who has come to us in Jesus Christ and who will come to us again. Prepare the way of the Lord! That's God's message for us. Prepare the way so that our children, our neighbors, our non-Christian friends may see the salvation of God that comes to us in Jesus Christ. Prepare the way of the Lord so that our generation may witness a new chapter in world history - the dawn of God's coming kingdom.

Let us pray: