

Build Up the Ancient Ruins

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 3rd Sunday of Advent, December 16, 1990. Scripture Lessons: 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; Luke 1:46b-55.

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

Shortly after the fire that destroyed our sanctuary, Myra Ortiz, a ~~first~~ ^{Special Ed} ~~grader~~ in Mrs. Lininger's classroom, wrote, "I was there. I was scared. The organ burned and the stained glass windows melted. It was so hot. I felt sad because it was Mrs. Keefer's church." Mark Yerkes wrote, "I could hear the water spraying. I saw and smelled a lot of smoke. I felt very scared and a little sad." And Jason Chandler, "I was at the fire. When I watched the church burning, I felt sad. My cousin was crying.... Another man was hugging his wife because she was crying.... I told them that I was sorry... God likes his church." Richard Barrett wrote, "On Sunday, a church burnt down.... Many people loved the church. Two people that I know went to it. I loved it too. When I go to school, I see the steeple.... Many people cried when the steeple fell. Even the windows melted." Lamar Palmer wrote, "Nothing is left except the ... bricks."

Now listen to the Word of God. "The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor.... They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations."

In the aftermath of the fire we were oppressed and brokenhearted. We mourned. We continue to mourn. One older member said to me wistfully, "I wonder if I will ever see the church rebuilt." Particularly now, at

Christmas time, I feel oppressed and brokenhearted when I remember our old sanctuary. I feel oppressed with anxiety about the fund-raising. I feel oppressed about the trial which is set for January 22. Will we get what we believe is just and fair? I feel oppressed about when we can begin rebuilding. And if you've seen me in the office recently you may have noticed them I've been a little irritable.

I miss that old sanctuary even though I was here only three years before it burned. How much more oppressed and brokenhearted some of you must feel who were baptized in that sanctuary as a baby, who were married there, who received Holy Communion there for the first time, who came to know and profess Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior there.

I remember how it looked that last Christmas. The large Christmas tree on the right. The garlands hanging from the massive oak beams. The candles in the window. The smell of evergreens and, on Christmas Eve, The sound of *Silent Night, Holy Night* as we lit the darkness with our candles. The smell of melted wax. The smooth feel of the oak cushioned pews. The gold inlay around the chancel arch. The rich sound of the organ. The creak of the old floor as you walked down the aisle. The stained glass windows engraved with the names of our ancestors in the faith and bearing witness to the communion of saints.

And I think again of the Word of God to ancient Israel, a word of promise and hope. Let me tell you briefly about the historical background of our Old Testament lesson. 586 years before the birth of Jesus, the nation which is now called Iraq invaded Palestine, set on fire the beautiful temple and left it devastated and in ruins. The Iraqis, who were then called Babylonians, carted all the wealth of Israel back to Babylon (whose ruins are just miles from present day Baghdad). The ancient Babylonians also took hostages.

Thousands of the foremost citizens of Israel were taken back to Iraq where they were held in captivity for 70 years. Many died in captivity. Many grew oppressed and lost all hope of returning to their home-land. Children were born there who had never seen the temple in its glory and who could only be told of its splendour. Many of God's people lost hope of ever seeing a new sanctuary consecrated. Each year winter came, but never Christmas.

But there were those among God's people who kept hope alive. They continued to worship God and to teach their children despite the inhospitable surroundings; despite the infidelity of many of God's people. And God's people discovered that God's presence went beyond the land of Israel. They discovered that God's presence and grace could be wonderfully experienced apart from the temple. To these people came God's comforting word announcing that God's people "shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations." Some who heard that Good News never saw it's fulfilment. Others saw the temple in building and a few saw it consecrated years later

God's Word is new in every age. God spoke of old and continues to speak today. God's people have continued to listen to the ancient text and have reappropriated God's Word in every age. Above all we hear God's ancient Word fulfilled in Jesus Christ our Lord. It's the voice of the Risen Lord which I hear saying to us today, "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me... he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners."

Some of you have lost loved ones this past year. Some of you have experienced tragedy in your family life. Some received bad news that has shaken you to the core. Some have been seriously disappointed by loved

ones. Some of you have loved ones serving in Saudi Arabia and you're understandably anxious as we stand poised for war. Out our way, the Lawless family is mourning the death of their wife and mother. The Ypremian family is mourning the loss of their home by fire. This afternoon friends and family of Dick Bailey will remember his life and mourn his death. Some of you may be oppressed about the sins and spiritual shortcomings of our church, both locally and nationally. You wonder if our church can be renewed and revived and once more speak the Gospel with conviction.

Furthermore, ^{I fear that} some of you are bound by your own sins, sins that, perhaps, you hate, that you struggle and long to be free of, but from which you have not yet been released. Others are oppressed by doubts which are not sins but which can, nevertheless, be just as oppressive.

Dare we believe the Good News of Isaiah's Gospel? Dare we believe that God is speaking good news to us this morning... proclaiming liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners? Dare we believe that we're free to break with evil and wrongdoing? Dare we believe that this coming new year will be the year of the Lord's favor... the year we'll begin to see the fulfillment of our hopes to renew and rebuild the church... not just physically, but spiritually and in every way?

This morning something wonderful will happen that gives me hope and lifts my spirit. About an hour ago 4 men and women were commissioned in a worship service at the First Presbyterian Church in West Chester to bring to us a check for \$10,000. Late last year, when they were drawing up their mission budget for 1990, they designated us to receive \$10,000. This morning we're going to receive a check for that money and we're going to dedicate the gift of that money to the glory of God.

There's a sense in which I believe the Old Testament Scripture is fulfilled, not only in Christ, but also in you who have come from First Church in West Chester. The Spirit of the Lord is upon you, because the Lord has anointed you; he has sent you to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to comfort all who mourn; to provide for us who mourn- to give us a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.

When God comforts us, he doesn't just proclaim his word. God comes to us. ^{God} ~~He~~ came to comfort the people of God in ancient Israel through the voice of prophets. When the world had come to its darkest and most desperate hour God came to us in person, in Jesus of Nazareth, and through his life, death, and resurrection God proclaims, "I am for you, not against you. I have come to set you free. I have come to heal your broken hearts. I have come to put my arms around you and hug you in your distress."

Because of that good news, the good news that comes to us in Jesus Christ... the good news that comes to us from West Chester this morning... I can say, with the ancient prophet, "I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness."

Let us pray :