

10/12/03

MY TIMES ARE IN YOUR HANDS

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson at the Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on October 12, 2003.

Scripture Lessons: Psalm 31:1-5, 14-16, 21-22

1.2 The Name

On July 4th, 1939, at Yankee Stadium, Lou Gehrig made one of the most moving speeches in sports history. "Fans, for the past two weeks you've been reading about a bad break I got. Yet today, I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of the earth." For the last several weeks you've heard the news about the bad news we received but, despite that, I consider myself the most blessed man in the world. I've served this congregation for over 17 years and have received only kindness and encouragement. As I look back over my life I had a father and mother who loved and spoiled me. I have the greatest brother and sister. My sister Mary was one of the first theologians I ever studied under. My brother has been the hero of my life whose achievements make me proud. My wife - I can't say enough for her. She's an angel. No man could want a better wife. She has given me love, compassion and unconditional acceptance throughout our marriage. And our three sons. Every day I thank God for them. I'm so proud of the kind of young men they are. And my in laws. I am truly blessed. And now, you, the congregation have added blessings upon blessings with your prayers, visits, phone calls and many other deeds. I'm the most blessed man in the world and I want you to know how much I love you.

As far as my treatment is concerned, we're still consulting. We're cautiously optimistic that something can be done to buy me quality time so I can return to full time status. It takes a while to figure out exactly what kind of treatment I need. We've consulted topnotch physicians. I feel that we have very good guidance. The kind of cancer I have is very aggressive. They're hoping they can do a combination of chemotherapy and radiation to shrink the tumor and then to surgically remove as much of it as possible.

Now I want to reflect on what's happening theologically. So as I reflect theologically on what's going on in my life now, I draw your attention to verse 15 of Psalm 31. *My times are in your hands*. Notice, first, that this is a prayer. It's not an intellectual or theological statement like, "I believe that my times are in God's hands." I want to emphasize that this is above all a prayer. The Psalmist is talking to God and says, *My times are in your hands*. What are *my times*? *My times* are my lifetime and all the events that surround it. If the scientists are right I had no time for 18 billion years from the time of the Big Bang to my birth. I was nothing. I

had no time. My times began with my birth or conception. So *my times* are my life from birth to the present.

My times include the people in my life, the events, joys, sorrows; my sickness and health from birth till death.

As I grow older I become more aware of my times

Some scientists claim that only human beings are aware of the passing of time. We become enormously aware as we grow older and time seems to speed up. *How time flies. Where has the time gone? We live on borrowed time.* I was blessed to grow up in a home where I always believed that my times (my borrowed times) are in God's hands. The thought didn't come all at once. It was always there as long as I can remember. God has given me *my times*, all my times -- my good and bad times - and I live in borrowed time, time borrowed from God's timeless life.

And yet, the cancer prognosis challenged my faith. If you know me, you know that I've never claimed to have great faith. My job isn't to preach my faith but to point to the God who has come to us in Jesus Christ -- the source of faith. So I hope it doesn't upset anybody to hear that my faith was challenged by news of my cancer. Initially I felt very insecure about my mortality. The first night I was in the hospital the thought came to me, "Maybe there is no God. Maybe my whole life as a minister has been wasted. Maybe *my times* (my life) has no significance, no meaning. Maybe we emerge out of nothingness, live a few years, and go back into the darkness." There's nothing like cancer to challenge the foundations of what we believe, hope and trust. But as I lay there thinking these atheistical thoughts I turned to the One I doubted and I prayed, *My times are in your hands...Let your face shine upon your servant; save me in your steadfast love.*

My times are in God's hands. I believe *your times* are in God's hands -- whoever you are. It makes no difference whether you believe or don't believe -- I'm confident that the One who holds my times in his hand holds yours as well. And this One to whom I pray, loves us more than anyone has ever loved us and wants the very best for us even when we don't want the best for ourselves; even when we don't seek the best for ourselves.

The One who has *my times* in his *hand*, is going to win in the end. War, hunger, disease, and death will not have the final word. When my boys were younger I taught them how to play chess and I often let them win. Sometimes they lost their bishops, many of their pawns and rook and a knight while I had lost nothing. They felt like the game was lost. But I would say to them, "Let me play your side of the board." We'd turn the board

around and they placed their pieces in my hands. I would use their pieces to snatch victory out of the jaws of defeat for them. That's been a metaphor of what it means to recognize that *my times are in God's hand*. God can turn defeat into victory. God is the One who TURNS DEFEAT INTO VICTORY. I see that above all on the cross. By late afternoon on Good Friday Jesus was dead. But God in Christ turned the tragedy of the crucifixion into the triumph of Easter morning. God, not death, is going to win in the end.

But notice something else about the words of the Psalmist. *My times are in your hands*. The hands are God's hands. But does God really have hands? Is this just a metaphor the Bible uses? God is Spirit. How can God have hands? And yet as a Christian I believe that God, the invisible God, the One who is behind this universe, has real flesh and blood hands. I believe God entered this world in the person of Jesus of Nazareth; as a baby with little, delicate brown fingers. One of the Gospel writers says Jesus was a carpenter as a boy. God was a carpenter. He used his fingers to build houses and finish cabinets. At the age of 30 Jesus began to preach, teach and heal. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, and in the secure knowledge that he was, in a unique way, God's son, Jesus went about healing people. One of the characteristic notes of his healing was his touch. Jesus touched a leper and healed him. He placed his hands on the eyes of blind people and their eyesight was restored. When the disciples were in a sea storm, Jesus lifted up his hands and said, "Peace, be still" and the wind and the waves ceased. Jesus took a loaf of bread, broke it and fed thousands of people with it. Jesus took a little girl by her hand and raised her from the dead. In the penultimate chapters of the Gospels we see those hands of Jesus nailed to a cross, powerless any longer to heal, to bless, to restore life. That was Friday. But on Easter Sunday God raised Jesus from the dead. Jesus appeared to his disciples showing them his hands. God, through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, conquered sin, disease and death.

So I've learned to fall asleep each night praying to the One who has come to us in Jesus Christ. Even though I'm a protestant I appreciate the Roman Catholic devotion to the crucifix. I know that Christ is risen but the crucifix provides a powerful symbol of the suffering hands of God stretched out to bring us all to eternal life. I invite you to join the Psalmist in talking to the One I've been talking about; the One into whose hands our times are secure. Let us pray: *My times are in your hands... Let your face shine upon your servant; save me in your steadfast love.*

Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. ~~But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind.~~ Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. ~~And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you.~~ But I want you to know tonight, that we, ~~as a people~~, will get to the promised land. And I'm happy, ~~tonight~~. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.

¹ *In you, O LORD, I seek refuge; do not let me ever be put to shame; in your righteousness deliver me.*

² *Incline your ear to me; rescue me speedily. Be a rock of refuge for me, a strong fortress to save me.*

³ *You are indeed my rock and my fortress; for your name's sake lead me and guide me,*

⁴ *take me out of the net that is hidden for me, for you are my refuge.*

⁵ *Into **your hand** I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God.*

¹⁴ *But I trust in you, O LORD; I say, "You are my God."*

¹⁵ *My times are in **your hands**...*

¹⁶ *Let **your face** shine upon your servant; save me in your steadfast love.*

²¹ *Blessed be the LORD, for he has wondrously shown his steadfast love to me when I was beset as a city under siege.*

²² *I had said in my alarm, "I am driven far from your sight." But you heard my supplications when I cried out to you for help.*