

Nevertheless!

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the third Sunday in Ordinary Time, January 21, 1996. Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 9:1-4; Psalm 27:1, 4-9; 1 Corinthians 1:10-18; Matthew 4:12-23.

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

The ancient nation of Israel dreamed of being a super power, the center of a great political empire. Reality hit home when the rising Assyrian Empire began to conquer the northern territories belonging to Israel around 700 years before the birth of Jesus. The land of Naphtali, about a hundred and twenty miles north of Jerusalem, was the first to fall to the invading Assyrians. The Assyrian army continued southward. The land of Zebulon fell next - about ninety miles North of Jerusalem. Both Naphtali and Zebulon were part of the region of Galilee. The Assyrians continued moving south, burning and destroying everything in their path like Sherman's army sweeping through the south during our Civil War.

Isaiah the prophet, living in Jerusalem during the reign of King Hezekiah, saw the calamity that was about to fall on God's people. At the end of chapter 8 Isaiah prophesied, "Distressed and hungry, they will roam through the land; when they are famished, they will become enraged and, looking upward, will curse their king and their God. Then they will look toward the earth and see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom, and they will be thrust into utter darkness." In other words, God's people will go through a long period of intense suffering. They will be so distressed that God's people will actually curse God.

"Nevertheless", Isaiah says beginning at verse one of chapter nine, "Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress." "Nevertheless" means "in spite of". "In spite of

the darkness you're experiencing; in spite of the gloom, God is alive. God hasn't forgotten his people. The darkness and distress will not last forever".

The whole Gospel is contained in that one little word, "Nevertheless". Think of how that little word, "nevertheless" is used in the Bible. One time five thousand men and women came out to hear Jesus teach in the wilderness. They got hungry. The only food was a boy's lunch. Nevertheless, the boy gave Jesus what he had. And Jesus took those five loaves and three fish and fed all those people. Another time Jesus appeared on the shore of the sea of Galilee to Peter and some of the disciples returning with empty nets from fishing. He told them to cast their nets one more time. Peter said, "We've been fishing all night and haven't caught a thing, nevertheless at your word we'll obey." They cast their nets and could hardly pull them up, they were so filled with fish. In the garden of Gethsemane Jesus prayed, "Let this cup pass: nevertheless Thy will, Father, not Mine, be done." Jesus was crucified, dead, and buried. He descended into hell, nevertheless God lifted him out of hell and raised him from the dead. We were God's enemies, nevertheless Christ died for us. Paul persecuted Christians and consented to the death of Stephen. Nevertheless, God converted Paul and sent him into the world to preach the gospel.

I think of a poem by James Russell Lowell,

Though the cause of evil prosper, Yet 't is truth alone is strong;
Though her portion be the scaffold, And upon the throne be wrong,
Yet that scaffold sways the future, And, behind the dim unknown,
Standeth God within the shadow Keeping watch above His own.

Evil may prosper, nevertheless truth alone is strong. Martyrs are hung on the scaffold, nevertheless the scaffold will change the world. The future is dark and unknown, nevertheless God stands within the shadow keeping watch above us.

Think of Helen Keller. Helen Keller was deaf, blind and mute. She lived in perpetual darkness. Someone wrote into to one of those Sunday magazine supplements like Parade. She said, "I've just read a reference to a book by Helen Keller. This must be an error because Helen Keller was deaf, mute and blind. Isn't there some mistake?" In the answer the editor replied, "No. You're correct that she was deaf and mute and blind. Nevertheless, she's not only the author of that book, she's the author of nine books. She wrote in braille. She also wrote slowly in longhand. She graduated from Radcliffe College with honors. She contributed 2 million dollars to a foundation to help others." In spite of her darkness, Helen Keller became a beacon of hope to all people who live in a land of deep darkness.

Yesterday I preached at Bill Berger's memorial service at the First Presbyterian Church of Germantown in Philadelphia. Earlier this week I talked with Muriel. A year after Bill and Muriel got married they discovered they could never have children. Darkness! Distress! Gloom. Nevertheless, their pastor from First Presbyterian Church in Germantown encouraged them to lead a youth group. They became deeply involved in the youth ministry of First Church. They taught Sunday School. Muriel said, "We weren't able to have any children of our own. Nevertheless God gave us hundreds over the years."

Nearly two years ago Jim McCleod was traveling down the old Baltimore Pike between Jennersville and Oxford. His car skidded on snow and ice and crashed into a telephone pole. Doctors thought Jim might not live. He lay in a coma for days. He wasn't given much hope of walking or using his arms. Darkness! Gloom! Distress! Nevertheless, Jim didn't give up. He saw light in the darkness. He had hope. He worked hard in his physical therapy and fought his way back. Today he's driving, he's working, he's deeply involved in community service. He just finished his three year term as a deacon.]

Friday night our neighbor, Maryanne Seefeldt, invited our family to dinner. The Seefeldts have three children the same ages as ours. For the last several years Mr. Seefeldt has been suffering from Alzheimers. He once was responsible for administering millions of dollars for Scott paper. Now he simply sits and stares. Before we went home Maryanne gave us a belated Christmas letter she's sending out to friends. She told me I could share with you a portion of it. She writes, "This year has been a challenge. Fred, the love our life, is not able to do very much now, nevertheless there are sporadic moments when he still has the sparkle in his eyes and he has not forgotten to say 'thank you' and 'I love you.'"

Darkness invades the lives of each one of us. Nevertheless God gives us rays of light in our darkness. God promises that the darkness will one day pass. The darkness may be Alzheimers. It may be unemployment or the threat of unemployment. It may be divorce or separation. The loss of a loved one. Dark memories from the

past. "Nevertheless", God promises, "there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress... The people walking in darkness have seen a great light."

James S. Stewart, a great preacher from Scotland, once said, "Reach out of darkness, and feel the pressure of a more than human hand. Stand up in the might of Christ, and bid defiance to your fears."

Christians believe that a great light has dawned in the birth of Jesus. Christians believe that the darkest day that ever happened, happened the day Jesus died. Darkness will never again be so deep. Christ's resurrection is like the flash of light of a new creation. A new creation.

In spite of all that's dark and wrong in the world - in Bosnia, in the Middle East, the news of the little girl who was kidnapped and murdered last week in Texas, the floods that devastated Pennsylvania this past week; in spite of everything in our life that weighs us down, God has set a limit to the darkness. God doesn't promise us freedom from calamity. God doesn't promise that we'll never experience darkness in our lives. The Lord does promise to be our light and salvation. The Lord promises that darkness won't be the final word. Morning will dawn. Light will triumph over darkness. Joy over gloom. God is going to win in the end.

Let us pray: Lord our God, your people who walk in darkness have seen a great light. Upon those who dwell in the night of their lives a new day has dawned. For the long-awaited Christ, whom you promised, has entered the world to illumine our way. The radiance of your glory cannot be hidden from our eyes. When we seek to live in the shadows of doubt, you reveal the folly of our ways. If the darkness of gloom overtakes us, you dazzle us with the luster of your Kingdom. Our flickering faith is matched with the brilliance of your plan for creation. We bow before you, bathed in the light of your love and aglow with the gift of your grace. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.