

## New Heavens and Earth

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 23rd Sunday after Pentecost, November 12, 1995. Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 65:17-25; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13; Luke 21:5-19.

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

Did you see the photographs beamed down from the Hubble telescope last week? Dark cosmic clouds thousands of light years away. Cosmic clouds within our own galaxy, the Milky Way, but far beyond our stellar system. The dark clouds reminded me of a glove with fingers. At the tip of each finger small lights twinkled, like the lights on a Christmas tree. The commentator said that those lights were stars being born. The first time anything like it has been observed. The clouds, he said, were like a birthing room. The clouds were like a cocoon of cosmic proportions. Out of the cocoon a new star would emerge. A new world was coming into existence. The surrounding dusty cloud of cosmic gas could very well become a new solar system - a new heaven and earth.

I was about five years old. I was sitting on my dad's lap in the living room. He was reading to me from an encyclopedia. It was called The Book of Knowledge. He pointed to a picture in the book. An artist's rendition of the Milky Way galaxy of which we are a part. A spiral like galaxy containing billions of suns. An <sup>arrow</sup> ~~hour~~ pointed to one of the arms of the spiral far from the center of the galaxy. "That's where the sun is, and our solar system," my dad said. The book said that the Milky Way galaxy slowly revolves - once every several millions years. One revolution ago dinosaurs walked the earth. When the Milky Way galaxy revolves two or three more times, the book said, all the

material in our sun will be burned up and our whole solar system will come to an end. That frightened me - the thought of the heavens and earth disappearing.

What's your response to the thought of a new heaven and earth? Does it frighten you? Does it intrigue you? For thousands of years God's people have held firmly to the hope the God is going to create new heavens and earth. Listen to the Word of God: Isaiah 65:17, "I am about to create new heavens and a new earth."

Hundreds of years passed from the time Isaiah prophesied new heavens and earth. And, then, people living in Palestine began to proclaim a new creation had already come. The Apostle Paul wrote, "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" It has happened, the early Christians claimed. It is happening. A new creation.

Isaiah's vision of new heavens and earth focuses on a city - on Jerusalem. In the new creation, the new Jerusalem will be a city in which there will be no weeping. No infants that die of sudden infant death syndrome. People live out their lives. They build houses and live in them. They plant vineyards and enjoy them. They live productive lives. All the children are blessed by the Lord. Nature is reconciled. The wolf and the lamb feed together. But the serpent - that old serpent that tempted Adam and Eve - will lick the dust.

I believe that God brings about the new creation through the church. The risen Christ living within the church, living within us, working within us, is bringing about a new creation.

I spent last week at Princeton Seminary taking a seminar entitled, "Church Revitalization". Here's one of the exercises we did. We were told to close our eyes and imagine attending our own funeral. Then we were asked to chose four people to speak at our funeral: a family member, a friend, a fellow church member, a colleague. What would I want each person to say about me that they couldn't say about me now? Then we were asked: what would I have to change in my life in order for those people to say those things?

That really got me thinking about the church. In the year 1999, we'll remember the 10th anniversary of the Memorial Day fire that resulted in a new creation of our church. Imagine attending that celebration four years from now. What will the speakers say about the new birth of our church?

This is what I imagine ~~what~~ <sup>might</sup> people will say. "Remember how so many stores on main street were closed ten years ago. Remember how people bought and sold <sup>illegal</sup> drugs in Oxford? Back then some bread winners in Oxford worked 40 hours a week and couldn't support their family even in a modest way. Back then so many marriages were breaking up. Teenage out of wedlock pregnancy was condemning a whole generation to poverty. Ten years ago only a hand full of people could recite more than one or two of the Ten Commandments. It was quite common to hear the Lord's name taken

in vain. Back then so many people claimed to know God who weren't a part of a worshipping and serving community of faith.

But now - look at what's happen largely because of the new life that has come into the town through the Oxford Presbyterian Church. It's like a new creation. Now, everybody willing to work earns enough to support their family. Drugs and teenage pregnancy is unheard of. People are getting married and ~~their~~ staying married - their working through their problems. Nearly all the young people are graduating from high school now. You can walk the streets and alleys of Oxford without any fear. And now nearly everybody knows the Ten Commandments. And so many people in Oxford, not only claim to believe in God, but they've gotten involved in their churches. <sup>They gather to thank & praise God through & for a new work</sup> They're sharing the gospel with all the new people in town. Worship has become a joy - the churches are filled with glad and rejoicing people.

How did it get to be that way? Those Presbyterians. They really came alive. It was like a new creation. What would we have to change in our lives for this dream to come true? What would we have to change in our church?