

Our Message Is Jesus Christ

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A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the Second Sunday in Advent, December 10, 1989. Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 11:1-10; Psalm 72:1-8; Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12.

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

This morning's very special for me because we'll be receiving new adult members for the first time since our fire. I had a lot of anxiety about how the fire would affect ~~effect~~ our attendance. I was afraid that, without a beautiful sanctuary, new people wouldn't want to confess their faith in Jesus Christ within our church. I really lacked faith because our average attendance has gone from 172 a Sunday in 1988 to 185 a Sunday in 1989. Hopefully we've discovered that our faith is in Jesus Christ and not a building. We know that these new members haven't been drawn to us by an impressive building. We have confidence that Jesus Christ has drawn them to us through his Spirit.

This morning we welcome 8 new members.

Deborah Morrow comes to us from the army. She's been all around the world and is now living with her aunt and uncle, Dave and Rita Cedarberg. She also brings her son, Zachary, for baptism.

Carol Maise comes from a baptist background. I first met Carol through the senior center. She was a very good friend of Bob Pollock who encouraged her to come to our church. She writes in her confession of faith, "I believe by the grace of God through faith I am saved. I believe that Jesus paid the sin dept. (sic) for me."

Jim and Jane Abel come to us from western Pennsylvania where they were active in the Methodist church. The Abel's are the parents of newly elected elder, Jim Abel.

Margo Lane comes to us from Oxford. A couple of years ago she began bringing her son, Jeff, to Sunday school and staying for church. Over the

past several years she's really sensed the hand of God on her life. Now she's come to the place in her life that she wants to confess Jesus Christ as her Lord and Savior publicly and be a part of this church..

Joan Truman will also be joining. She comes to us from the Philadelphia area. I can remember the first Sunday she worshiped with us. She spoke with me a few days later about the implications of the sermon. Joan has been one of our prayer warriors over the last year. When she's able she joins us on Wednesday evening for prayer even though she's spent a long day at work in the Philadelphia area.

Steve Hill is a long time Oxford resident. He comes out of a Methodist and Quaker background. He's married to Barbara and, together, they're the parents of Kristi who's one of the young people in our confirmation class. Steve was a student with me in Newark High School a couple of years ago. We've had some really good talks over the last several months about what it means to be a Christian.

Jean Shenk also comes to us from a Methodist background. She's the mother of Alan Shenk who was recently elected as a Deacon. Jean has been worshiping with us regularly for about a year or more now. In her confession of faith she wrote, "I have taken Jesus Christ as my Saviour and with the help of God, I will do my best to serve him the rest of my life."

We also plan to baptize four people. One is an infant, Zachary Morrow. We baptize the infants of believers because we believe they're included, with their parents, in a covenant relationship with Christ and already belong to the people of God. We, therefore, believe that the infants of believers are to be included as members of the church by baptism. God promises to redeem these children from sin through the blood of Christ and

to give them the gift of faith from the Holy Spirit.

Three children are old enough to confess their own faith in Jesus and express their desire to be baptized. Several weeks ago Lynn McAlister and Laurie Sample invited me to their Sunday School class to talk with the kids about baptism. Most of the children had been baptized but a couple hadn't and wanted to know how they could be. I explained that if at least one of their parents was a believer and an active member of Christ's church they were entitled to baptism as a sign of the special relationship they have to Christ.

I explained also that anyone who publicly confesses Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior may also be baptized. So Jason and Amanda Good along with Amy Shank and Amy Holbrook will come this morning to be baptized as believers.

We, the congregation, need to pray for all these people. Pray that they'll add knowledge to their faith. Get to know them personally. Encourage them to grow in faith through your own example of faithfulness to Christ. Live out your faith in Christ before them.

It's always a great joy to receive new members into the church but I want to emphasize that the church, as an institution, doesn't save us. I have a very high view of the institutional church. I believe that the Church is the Body of Christ. I believe that there's an inseparable relationship between Christ and the Church. I believe that Christ has instituted the Church to carry on his ministry of healing and forgiving. I don't believe that we can have a personal relationship to Jesus Christ without being connected to fellow believers where the Word of God is preached, the Sacraments celebrated, and church discipline exercised.

The sacraments aren't just rituals, although they can become empty

rituals. Look at baptism for a few moments. A person can be baptized without having a personal relationship to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior just as a woman can wear an engagement ring and not really be engaged to anybody. A woman can go out and buy her own engagement ring or wear her mother's even though she's not engaged. And engagements can be broken. Jesus will never break his engagement with us but, through neglect and carelessness, we can break off our engagement with Christ. Many infants engaged to Christ in baptism grow up and never personally trust Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Many adults who once professed Christ as Savior have separated themselves from his family and ignore Christ and his sacraments.

Some people once came out to John the Baptist for baptism and he said, "You snakes- who told you that you could escape from the punishment God is about to send?" You see, John the Baptist was a Baptist so he could call those people "a bunch of snakes" and warn them about punishment. Presbyterians don't like to use strong, emotional language like that and we have strong reservations about using the fear of punishment as an incentive to holiness. But we're crazy if we think that simply being baptized or belonging to a Christian family impresses God apart from a desire to live for Christ.

John the Baptist was talking about the coming of Jesus when he said, "I baptize you with water to show that you have repented, but the one who will come after me will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." John the Baptist felt inadequate because he could only baptize with water. That's all I can do as your pastor. I can't baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Only Jesus can do that.

What does it mean to be baptized with the Holy Spirit and with fire?

At the very least it means that *Jesus* saves us and not the ceremony of baptism with water. Some people are baptized with water as infants but it's not until years later that the Holy Spirit leads them into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. I think of a woman in my Reedsville congregation. One Monday she called me and said, "Something wonderful happened to me yesterday in the worship service. It's was during the Apostles' Creed. As we said, 'I believe... in Jesus Christ, God's only son, our Lord...' it suddenly occured to me, 'I really do believe in Jesus Christ as my personal savior.'" She said, "I was filled with a great joy. I *believe*. I really *do* believe and trust in Jesus Christ."

She went on to say how she'd been baptized as an infant, she'd been raised in the church and she had never really doubted the truth of the Christian faith. But now, she said, I believe, not just because the church believes, not just because my parents raised me to believe. I believe because / believe. This is my faith. Jesus is *my* Lord and Savior."

I believe that she was baptized with the Holy Spirit and with fire that Sunday morning as she repeated the Apostles' Creed. The Holy Spirit enabled her to make the Christian faith her very own. From that day forward she was on fire for the Lord.

That's my prayer for each one of us. I pray that the Holy Spirit will enable us to make the faith into which we've been baptized our very own and that we'll be on fire for the Lord. Amen.

Let us pray: God our Father: we thank you for your faithfulness, promised in the sacrament of Holy Baptism and for the hope we have in your Son Jesus. Most of us have been baptized with water. Baptize all of us with Holy Spirit, so that what we say may be your word and what we do may be your work. By your power, may we be made one with Christ our Lord in common faith and purpose.

Prayers of the People Bb

We have set our hope on you, our living God, as those who set course for home from distant places. But we need your help if we are to keep on course: we need fresh sight of you, on which to check our bearings. Let this service of worship be a check-point for us. Show us where we are and where we

should be. You are near as well as far— accompanying as well as bookoning: make this a meeting-place between our minds and your mind, so that we may see that the controlling interest in human affairs is yours.

Living God, you declare yourself to be the Saviour of all people. You know in full what we know only in part, how much men and women and children need a Saviour. If you do not rescue us from our egotism and complacency, who will? If you do not purify our motives, and shake us out of the sentimentality of our usual hopes and fears, who will? May your declared purpose get through to the world today, our Father.

Living God, you declare yourself to be the Saviour, above all of believers. In every country in the world are men and women and children who believe that your word in Jesus Christ holds promise not only for this life but for the life to come. Save those who trust in Christ from spiritual arrogance: save them equally from dismay at the force of all that they are up against. Show them how to have divided opinions without having divided loyalties. May your declared purpose get through to the Church today, our Father.

There are too many whose lives are crippled and inhibited by illness, ignorance, bitterness and grief; by exploitation and by envy, by physical or mental handicap. We know and love some of these: you know and love them all. Take them into the care and skill of your own hands: help us all to be your own hands: so that everything that happens may come to serve the purposes of your love, and your design for humanity may be fulfilled in all its beauty, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

And now as Christ our savior has taught us, hear us as we humbly pray...

Maur Melburn

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family of San Vincent

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