

Plans: Human and Divine

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 22nd Sunday after Pentecost, October 15, 1989. Scripture Lessons: Micah 1:2, 2:1-10; Psalm 26; 2 Timothy 2:8-15; Luke 17:11-19.

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

Each one of you've come this morning to hear the Word of God. Your hoping that the Lord will speak to you and, maybe, give you some answers to your problems. Some of you may've had a fight with your spouse this morning. You were in a hurry to get here on time and angry words were exchanged. Maybe some of you've had a bad week at work. You're afraid you might lose your job or you didn't get the raise or the promotion you were looking for. Some of you maybe concerned with your health... you're awaiting tests or there's some ache or pain that won't go away and you're worried. Others are grieving the loss of a loved one. Some of you are worried about a son or daughter who's not turning out the way you hoped. And so you've come to church to hear the Word of God with the hopes that God will speak to your needs, answer your questions, solve your problems.

But the Word of the Lord that comes to us through the prophet Micah doesn't really address any of our personal, felt needs. It calls us to turn away from our own felt needs and look at the wider world. "Hear this, all you nations!" Hear this Nicaragua and Panama. Listen to the Word of the Lord, South Africa. The Sovereign Lord will testify against you, O Soviet Union and Israel and Iran and Syria and the United States... "all who live on earth." The Word of the Lord that comes to us from the prophet Micah calls us to look away from ourselves and our own needs and to look at the victims whose fields and houses have been seized by those who lie awake and plan evil. The Word of the Lord this morning points us away from our own private and personal worries about our health and family and future

and calls our attention to a suffering world.

The Lord has a deep desire to communicate, not just with his own people, but with the whole world. The Lord God is interested, of course, in our own personal lives, our joys and concerns but the Lord wants to get the world's attention as well. God doesn't want the world to perish. God doesn't want the earth to be destroyed.

Whatever we believe today about God's judgment, you can be sure that the prophets and the apostles believed that if the world doesn't listen and respond to the Word of God it's headed for disaster and not even God's people will be exempt from that judgment. Now it may be that some of you are saying, "Don't preach about all that. God is not going to disgrace us. Do you think God's people are under a curse. Has the Lord lost his patience? Would he really do such things? Doesn't he speak kindly to those who do right."

Well, it doesn't really take a person with a whole lot of insight to see that unless the injustice of apartheid is uprooted in South Africa that nation is headed for disaster and even the people who are doing right are going to get hurt. If the injustices in East Germany aren't addressed that nation is headed for disaster and it's going to affect Christians as well as non-Christians.

The Lord God wants the world to know there's hope. Disaster can be averted if we listen to and obey the Word of God. God has shown us. God has told us what we must do. Nuclear war can be averted. Hunger, poverty, injustice, oppression, and the tyranny of the drug cartels can be averted, but not if we ignore the Word of God. We try to defend ourselves from disaster with the most powerful arsenal in the world but if we don't listen to and obey the Word of God those weapons aren't going to protect us. The

nations all have their plans for their defense but the Word of the Lord insists that the only hope for the world is found in the Crucified Christ.

God wants the world to know about Christ, the crucified. God wants to heal the world's ills through the crucified and risen Lord. That won't happen if God's people are so caught up in our own needs and hurts that we can't see the needs of other nations and peoples throughout the world. That's going to be an especially difficult temptation to resist as we go about our plans to rebuild our church. It will be so easy to cut back on our missionary vision... to ignore the world. What a disaster it would be to get so caught up in our plans for the rebuilding of our church that we forget the nations and the peoples of the earth that the Sovereign Lord wants to hear his Word. What a disaster to end up with a beautiful new building, and cease to be a real church.

The Lord God doesn't arrange the stars at night in such a way that the nations of the world can look up and read the handwriting in the sky, "Hear this, all you nations; listen to this, all who live on earth!" The Lord God doesn't shout down from heaven as a voice without a body. God speaks through prophets like Micah. God comes down to earth in the person of Jesus of Nazareth and speaks to us in a human voice.

And now God has called the church "to be Christ's faithful evangelist, going into the world... participating in God's activity in the world through its life for others by: healing and reconciling and binding up wounds, ministering to the needs of the poor, the sick, the lonely, and the powerless, engaging in the struggle to free people from sin, fear, oppression, hunger, and injustice, giving itself and its sustenance to the service of those who suffer, sharing with Christ in the establishing of his just, peaceful, and loving rule in the world." G-3.0300

That places a weighty responsibility on us as God's people. I don't like the responsibility of telling the world to listen to the Word of God. I'd rather address your felt needs and assure you that God loves us and will never let us go. And I wouldn't be surprised if you felt that way too. In fact, I'm concerned about our mission fair that's coming up on Thursday evening, October 26, when Bruce Ridgon will speak and again on October 29 when we'll learn more about some of the missions we support here and around the world. We might think, "Well, that doesn't meet any of my needs. What has the mission of the Synod or the Presytery or the General Assembly have to do with me? Why give money to people on the other side of the world when we've got a church to build right here in Oxford."

Yesterday at Paul's wedding I was talking to Geoff Kohler, the Associate Minister at the Paoli Presbyterian church. The Paoli church was built within the last 5 years at the cost of one ^{and a} half million dollars. For a number of years before the sanctuary was built, their Pastor, Dick Streeter led the church to increase its mission giving... for every dollar spent on themselves, a dollar was sent away to support the general mission of the church. There were a lot of people who were saying, "We've got to cut back on missions if we're going to build a new sanctuary." Rev. Streeter had to do a lot of convincing to get the session and the congregation to continue their mission giving at that level. His attitude was that no one has the right to hear the Gospel more than once as long as there are people who have never heard the Gospel. I hope that we won't rebuild our church by withholding the Word of the Lord from the nations.

We share with all Christian churches a responsibility to the rest of the world. The General Assembly has given us the opportunity to respond to the concern for evangelism by raising 15 million additional dollars and by

raising another 13 million dollars in support for 80 new missionaries. "I'm proud to be a part of a church with a vision that starts at home and covers the whole globe." J. Richard Bass, Presbyterian Outlook, Oct. 16.

What do we want in life? Status, money, a degree, so that we might have "security"? Do we want a "good" future for ourselves? If that's all we want in life then Christians and churches can actually become henchmen of the devil and vehicles of injustice.

Micah warned his people that God is planning evil against those who "covet fields and seize them, and houses, and take them away; who oppress a person and his house, a man and his inheritance." God wants to warn the world that God is on the side of the oppressed and that he'll judge the oppressor in this world or the next. Biblical faith is not merely a private affair. Our God is Lord of Heaven and earth... King of kings and Lord of lords. Jesus is Lord of all.

Let us pray: O God of all the nations of the earth: Remember the multitudes who have been created in your image but have not known the redeeming work of our Savior Jesus Christ; and grant that, by the prayers and labors of your holy Church, they may be brought to know and worship you as you have been revealed in your Son; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.