

Rainbow, Bread and Wine

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the First Sunday of Lent, 21 February 1988. Scripture Lessons: Genesis 9:8-17; Psalm 25:1-10; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:9-15.

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

Lent wasn't always observed by Christians. The custom grew up hundreds of years after the resurrection. Originally it was a time when people who wanted to become Christians studied, prayed, and fasted for forty days before Easter in preparation for baptism. At the end of Lent, on the Saturday evening before Easter Sunday, the converts gathered to hear the story of how God created and saved us through Jesus. Among the many Old Testament stories, they heard how God destroyed the world by a flood because it had become so sinful and corrupt. Noah, however, trusted God when he told him to build the Ark so he and his whole family were saved from the destruction. After the waters subsided Noah and his family began life in an entirely new world. Old things had passed away and every was renewed.

Then the pastor would read to ^{these new converts preparing for baptism} them from the New Testament about how baptism was like the flood. Just as Noah and his family were saved from the corruption of the world ~~before the flood~~, we, as Christians are saved from the corruption and sin of the world we were born into. Just as the rainbow was a sign to remind God of his gracious covenant, the water of baptism is a sign to remind God ^{to look upon us in love and mercy.} ~~that he has graciously given us a new life~~ ^{of his promise} ~~and a clean conscious through Christ.~~

After the converts in the early church heard the Scriptures, they'd take off their outer garments, representing their old life, and they'd enter the waters of baptism. If there was enough water they were immersed to symbolize their death to their old life. When they came out of the water they were given a white robe, symbolizing their new life in Christ.

Baptism for these people meant a new life. It divided them forever from their life in paganism. For some of them it meant the loss of jobs. It meant persecution. It meant ridicule. ^{for some meant even martyrdom} Baptism literally saved them ~~from~~ ^{from the} life in a pagan world. It was an appeal to God for a new and clear conscience. When those converts came up from the baptismal waters they entered a new family. They embarked upon a new way of life. Life for them would never be the same. Old things were over and done with. Like the flood that brought Noah and his family to a new life, baptism brought a new life to them.

After these new Christians were baptized along with their children they came to the Communion Table to receive the Bread and Wine. This taught them that they couldn't live a new life in their own strength. Rather they were to get their strength from daily trusting Jesus Christ who fed them with his own body and blood.

Today we're reenacting something that Christians have done for nearly two thousand years. We know we don't have the strength to live the Christian life. We know we need power that only Jesus can give. So we come to eat this bread and drink this wine in full assurance that only Christ can give us the strength to live for him.

In some churches people come forward to receive the Bread and Wine. There's something very attractive about that. It reminds us of how Jesus says to us, "Come unto me..." But there's also something very attractive about receiving the Bread and the Wine right where we are in the pews. Jesus comes to us where we are. He doesn't tell us to give up smoking or chocolate for Lent in order to make ourselves acceptable to him. Rather Christ comes to us right where we are in our pews almost as if to say, "You don't even have strength to get up and come to me unless I first come

to you and feed you." He comes to us and says, "You've already been buried with me in baptism. You can no longer live that old life. The old life is gone. It's been destroyed, like the world before the flood. Now you need the strength that only I can give you. ^ "Take Eat... Drink, Apart from me you can do nothing. Trust me. I'll make you willing and able to live a new life."

Like The Rainbow, The Bread & Wine are signs of my covenant with you.

Now

and Remember That

*I have promised
" adopted you &
given you new
life through
Christ."*

Almighty God, whose blessed Son was led by the Spirit to be tempted by Satan: Come quickly to help us who are assaulted by many temptations; and, as you know the weaknesses of each of us, let each one find you mighty to save; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the HOLY Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.