

REPENT!

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 2nd Sunday of Advent, Decemember 9, 1990. Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 40:1-11; Psalm 85:8-13; 2 Peter 3:8-15a; Mark 1:1-8

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

A week ago on Friday, Kay's parents brought Kay and Philip home after he'd spent most of the week in the hospital recovering from an emergency appendectomy. I wanted to show them how much I'd missed them so I prepared dinner. The night before they got home Andrew, Mark and I went to the grocery store and got lettuce, lean ground beef, instant rolls, a cake mix and a can of automatic chocolate icing. We came home and baked a cake. I used Chris Higgins' recipe in the OPC cook book to prepare the meat loaf. I set the dining room table with our finest china, silverware and crystal goblets. Friday afternoon I made out an hour by hour schedule indicating when to turn the oven on, when to put the potatoes in, when to put the meat loaf in, when to start the rolls. I did a load of wash and hung them out to dry so Kay wouldn't have to worry about dirty clothes. Andrew cleaned a bathroom. Mark sliced carrots and celery. And then Kay and Philip got home, with her parents, just in time for one of the most delicious meat loaf dinners ever prepared.

That's how I prepared for the return of Kay and Philip. But how do we prepare for the coming of the Lord? The season of Advent calls us to prepare for the coming of the King of kings. In our Scripture lessons, we heard a voice crying out, "Prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God."

If we knew that Jesus were coming to this town on December 25 how would we prepare? I imagine that, despite the separation of church and

state, the Borrough Council would call a special meeting to discuss how to prepare for his coming. A debate would arise. "Can we use public moneys to prepare the way of the Lord?" But I imagine that the Council would think of crooked things that need to be made straight and rough places that need to be made plain despite ones allegiance to Jesus.

And I imagine the churches would be thrown into a tizzy. Wouldn't it be embarrassing if Jesus came and his own people had done nothing to prepare? I can imagine the ministerium calling a meeting. A minister gets up and says, "I know we have our diffences but we all believe that Christ is Lord. Let's work together on that basis and see if we can get all the people in this town to help us prepare the way for the Lord and help straighten up this place."

Individuals would do their own preparing. Husbands would say, "I've got to see what I can do to work out my marriage problems." Parents would say, "I hope my kids behave." Young people would be divided as well as older people as to how to prepare. Doubters and unbelievers might say, "I don't really know for sure if he's coming but I do know that there are things in my life that need to be straightened out. Why not straighten them out. If he doesn't come I haven't lost anything. If he does come maybe I'll enjoy his advent a little more."

Some Christians might say, "Well, there's no sense trying to clean up this town, nation, or world. After all, when Jesus comes he's going to destroy everything and save us." Hopefully, no Presbyterians will buy that because it's a cop-out. A recipe for complacency. Other Christians might sit around all day and argue about *how* the Lord will come and exactly *when*. Hopefully Presbyterians wouldn't be a part of that.

Hopefully Presbyterians would lead the way in saying, "Look, the Lord has been patient. The Lord doesn't want anybody in this town, nation or world to perish. He wants us all to repent. The Lord has given us nearly 2000 years to prepare for his coming. We've got to make straight what's crooked. We've got to remove every obstacle that keeps people from believing that God really loves and seeks their welfare. There's so much to do and so little time in which to do it."

Another might say, "Wouldn't it be terrible for the Prince of Peace to come when we're at war? Wouldn't it be terrible for the one born in a stable to return and find homelessness still a problem. Wouldn't it be terrible for the one who fed the 5000 with a few fish and loaves of bread to find hunger so prevalent when we Christians have so much food. Wouldn't it be terrible for the one who healed the sick to come back and find so many sick and dying people when modern medicine can work such miracles."

We Christians have our work cut out for us. The Lord in his great mercy and love has given us nearly 2000 years to prepare for his return. Some progress has been made. In the 1700's Christianity had become basically a European religion. Then William Carey came along and believed God wanted the whole world to hear the Gospel. At first Presbyterians opposed world missions. "If God wants to convert the heathen", one Edinburgh Presbyterian said, "he'll do it without our help." Fortunately William Carey and other mission minded people won the day and the 18th and 19th century saw, by far, the greatest expansion of the Christian faith from the time of Christ to the present. Those missionaries who travelled to distant parts of the world were preparing the way of the Lord. Thank God for missionaries and evangelists who are still preparing the way of the Lord in Ghana, and

Tanzania, China, Korea, Guatemala and right here in the United States.

Preaching the Gospel is one way to prepare the way for the Lord.

But there are other ways to prepare the way. Slavery was accepted by Christians for nearly 1800 years until people like Lord Shaftesbury and Bishop Wilburforce, working through the church and political channels, brought an end to slavery and the slave trade. Lord Shaftesbury once said, "My life's work to end slavery has been motivated above all by the promise of our Lord to come again." He believed the promise and so wanted to prepare the way for the Lord.

I think of others who've prepared the way of the Lord. For nearly a hundred years after the Civil War Christians supported segregation until an ordinary Christian named Rosa Parks refused to move to the back of a bus. Ordinary men and women sat down at lunch counters and refused to move until they were served or carried out by police. Those people, too, were preparing the way of the Lord.

At the beginning of the 18th century many 8 year old boys and girls worked 10 and 12 hours a day to help support their families. My own mother dropped out of school when she was in sixth grade to work in a factory ten hours a day. *From 7am to 6pm six days a week for a dollar a day which she gave to her father for room + board.* My father was working 50 hours a week by the time he was ten years old. Despite mountains of opposition Christians and non-Christians worked to change laws and attitudes that allowed this kind of child labor abuse. They too were preparing the way for the Lord.

Today we received the Peace Offering. Many people today say, "War is inevitable. The Bible says so. There always have been wars, there always will be wars. You're wasting your time working to establish peace." But I believe that God has called his people to have a different mindset than the rest of the world. The word "repent" literally means "to change your mind."

God calls us to have a change of mind about the way we look at the world; to look at the world and imagine new possibilities of resolving conflict. Just as slavery and child labor has been largely abolished, I believe that war can be too.

There are all kinds of ways that we can prepare the way of the Lord. Last Friday, eight young people from our church, accompanied by four adults, took clothing and food (that you contributed) to share with homeless people in Philadelphia. I believe those 8 young people were preparing the way for the Lord.

I rode home thinking that I can help prepare the way of the Lord by doing something about inadequate housing in Oxford. After Christmas I plan to invite people who've expressed concern about homelessness to meet and see if we can start a Habitat for Humanity home in the Oxford area in 1991. The idea of Habitat for Humanity is for volunteers to buy a delapidated house-- maybe an abandoned house-- and fix it up, without using any public money. A homeless or inadequately housed family is given the opportunity to buy this home. (You may wonder how a homeless person could buy a house. I was amazed to learn that many homeless people work 40 or more hours a week but still don't earn enough to pay rent). The Habitat program has proved itself to be an effective way to deal with the problem of homelessness in a limited way. I think it would be great if our church could have a part in preparing a Habitat Home for occupation by the time our church is rebuilt.

I want people to look at our church and say, "Those people are preparing the way of the Lord. They're not just building a building. Those crazy Presbyterians actually believe the Lord is coming. They're preparing for his advent. They're making straight what's crooked in their lives. They're working to make straight what's crooked in the community, nation and

world. They actually believe that God has called them to level mountains and make a difference in this world.

Let us pray: Merciful God, who sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation: Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins, that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.