

Seek the Lord While He May Be Found

A sermon preached by the Reverend Theodore S. Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the third Sunday in Lent, March 15, 1998. Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 55:1-9; Psalm 63:1-8; 1 Corinthians 10:1-13; Luke 13:1-9.

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

The Anglican clergyman and Greek scholar, J.B. Phillips, once read the obituary of an old retired clergyman who took his own life out of despair and hopelessness. He'd read some books written by scholars, and he'd seen some television programs that undermined his Christian beliefs. He felt that these highly qualified writers and speakers must know so much more than he did. They must be right. Jesus Christ didn't really rise from the dead. The Bible was no more than a bundle of myths. He began to feel that his whole life had been based on a hoax. So, in his despair, he committed suicide. J.B. Phillips was so angered and anguished when he read that obituary that he wrote a wonderful little book for people struggling with their faith entitled *The Ring of Truth*. The book is now thirty years old but I still find it valuable.

The discouraged and depressed clergyman reminds me of the people to whom Isaiah was writing. [Let me say parenthetically that most scholars believe that the first 39 chapters of Isaiah were written by Isaiah who lived and preached in the days immediately before Babylon conquered Jerusalem in 587 B.C. Chapters 40 through 66 are written from the standpoint of a preacher who lived in exile with the Jews in Babylon after the destruction of Jerusalem. Whoever the preacher was he greatly admired Isaiah and carried on his ministry in exile. He applied what Isaiah had written to his congregation's new situation in exile. Scholars ^{refer to} ~~have~~ named the writer of chapters 40 through 66, Second Isaiah.]

Above all Second Isaiah was an eloquent preacher. He ministered to a discouraged and depressed congregation on the verge of theological suicide. Everything the Jews valued had been destroyed. The Temple was destroyed. Their king was dead. They were exiled from the Promised Land. Their faith in God was seriously eroded. It seemed like all God's promises had failed. Everything they'd been taught about God seemed false. They were depressed. They were discouraged. They were desperate. They began to wonder if the LORD was God. Some

members of Second Isaiah's congregation advocated adopting the victorious gods of the Babylonians. Others, in the light of the tragedy they'd experienced, claimed that the events of history are determine by blind fate. Still others became addicted to a consumer culture and forgot God in their pursuit of food and drink and material possessions. Babylonian culture began to swallow up the Jews. They began to lose their distinctiveness. Like the clergyman who committed suicide, Isaiah's exiled congregation was on the verge of cultural and theological suicide.

Second Isaiah loved these suicidal exiles. One scholar claims that the Jews experienced more turmoil and change in the forty years following the destruction of Jerusalem than any other period in their history. Isaiah preached to a congregation whose lives were in chaos. He strove desperately to keep them from being assimilated into Babylonian culture. He preached passionately to preserve them from cynicism and despair. He took the message of his mentor, Isaiah, and adapted it to entirely new situations. He held passionately to the past, but he also preached that the God of Israel was going to act in new ways in the future to carry out God's gracious purpose for the world.

I identify with Second Isaiah. You are a lot like his congregation. Many of us were raised in Christian homes. We were taught at home, in Sunday School, and in church that God created the world in seven days. We were taught that Adam and Eve were the first human beings from whom the whole human race descended. We were taught that God destroyed the world in a flood. We were taught that God chose Israel from among all the nations to know God in a special way. We were taught that Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary. We were taught that Jesus healed people, raised the dead and even had power to still storms. We were taught that Jesus died on the cross for the sins of the world. We were taught that God raised Jesus from the dead. We were taught that Jesus is the Way and the Truth and the Life apart from whom no one can come to God. We were encouraged to invite Jesus into our hearts to be our Lord and Savior.

But something happened. Something happened for many of us as chaotic as the Babylonian captivity was for the Jews. W.B. Yeats tried to describe what happened when he wrote,

Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.

The Christian world many of us knew fell apart as we grew older. As some of us grew older much of what we were taught by parents and Sunday School teachers and pastors came under fierce attack. We were taught that the world was not created in 4004 B.C. but was billions of years old. We were taught that the human race is not descended from Adam and Eve but evolved naturally from apelike creatures over millions of years. And the uniqueness of the Biblical faith came under attack. Some of us discovered that many ancient peoples had stories about events like Noah's flood and the Tower of Babel. Some of us discovered that ancient history has many stories of virgin-born men and women who died and rose again. We began to wonder, "How can we continue to believe in the uniqueness of the Christian faith?" Our Christian world began to fall apart.

Many Christians reacted as the ancient Jews did when their world fell apart. Some of you have become confused about what you can believe. Some gave up the Christian faith altogether except for baptisms, confirmations, weddings, and funerals which are still cultural expectations for many people who have long since left the Christian fold and become assimilated into a secular culture. Some rejoice that they've been delivered from the darkness of childhood superstition and myths. Others escape into otherworldly mysticism. They turn to new age gurus - seances, horoscopes, and channeling. Still others immerse themselves in our consumer culture, forgetting God in our pursuit of material possessions and sensations. In other words, our congregation today is like the congregation to which Second Isaiah preached in Babylon. We are in danger of theological suicide.

I identify with the person scholars call Second Isaiah. Like him, I'm ^{trying} to persuade you to turn to the Lord. Like Second Isaiah, God has called me to take the ancient message of the

prophets and apostles and apply it to our modern world. At the last Presbytery meeting, outgoing moderator, Bill Hess, spoke of three options that the Church has in a chaotic and rapidly changing world. One option is restoration. Return to the past and pretend that the Enlightenment never happened. Pretend that Kant, Hume, Freud, Darwin and Einstein never lived. Bury our heads in the sand like ostriches. Most Presbyterians reject restoration as a serious option. A second option is revolution. Throw out miracles! Throw out the resurrection! Throw out Jesus Christ as the unique Savior and Lord! Throw out the Bible as the Word of God! Throw away everything that's old and create a new religion fully in tune with our modern world! Most Presbyterians reject the option of revolution. The third option is reformation. Hold fast to the message of the prophets and apostles, as Second Isaiah did, and ^{amph} ~~adapt~~ it to a new, modern world in chaos. Take the Bible as the Word of God in one hand and, in the other hand, take Kant, Freud, Darwin and Einstein and ~~let them dialogue with one another. Let them also be judged by the Word of God in Scripture.~~ ^{And we seek the Lord ... we call upon him ... we refuse to identify our thoughts with God's thoughts ... yet we seek to bring to bear his thoughts always upon our thoughts & ways.}

So despite all the problems and questions that our new world raises I preach as passionately as I know how that God has come near to us in Jesus. I give the Gospel invitation, "Come, everyone who thirsts, come to Jesus Christ, the water of Life. Come, buy and eat without price."

Seek the LORD while he may
 be found,
 call upon him while he is near;
 let the wicked forsake their way,
 and the unrighteous their
 thoughts;
 let them return to the LORD, that
 he may have mercy on
 them,
 and to our God, for he will
 abundantly pardon.

Let us pray: Eternal God, your kingdom has broken into our troubled world through the life, death, and resurrection of your Son. Help us to hear your Word and obey it, that we may become instruments of your saving love; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.