

The Fire Next Time

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, on Trinity Sunday of Easter, May 30, 1999. Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 43:2, 1Corinthians 3:10-15, Matthew 3:1, 2 and 11.

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

1. Ten years ago this Memorial Day weekend fire destroyed our 125 year old church building. Ten years ago. On the grand scale of time ten years isn't really that long. In some ways the last ten years have flown by. But many of you don't remember the old church. Nearly half our members have joined since the fire. Some of you joined *because* of the fire. You saw how we pulled together. The fire seemed to revive us. Above all God was true to his ancient promise. "When you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you."

2. Some of us vividly recall that night - a night to remember. I was in Lewistown, PA relaxing at my in-laws. I got a phone call from Nancy Andress, Clerk of Session. She was calling from her home and didn't know the extent of the fire. "The church is on fire." "How bad is it?" "I don't know." "Maybe it's in a trash can. Call me back when you find out." A half hour later. "I'm standing on the Jefferis's back porch. The roof of the church just caved in. Flames are shooting up the steeple." Pretty bad. I hung up and drove back to Oxford, arriving about 1 in the morning. The last flames were being doused. The fire companies were still there and would remain throughout the night.

3. One hundred volunteers from 17 fire companies in Pennsylvania, Maryland and Delaware fought the fire. Thank God there were no injuries. Somehow they'd managed to get in during the fire (I guess) and place plastic coverings over the book cases on the first floor to protect the books from the water being directed to the sanctuary on the second floor. As a result nearly all our books were saved. The paper said 3000. It was closer to 10,000. So throughout the night firemen went into the basement and carried out books, book cases, choir gowns, communion chalices, and anything else salvageable. In the morning the auxiliary fed us the most delicious breakfast you could imagine. Hash browns, sausage, bacon, eggs, pancakes,

juice. The works. Our church and community is extremely proud of our firefighters for the commitment and service to the community.

4. Firefighting has been called the worlds most dangerous profession. Several years ago, journalist Steve Delsohn interviewed hundreds of firefighters. They gave him vivid glimpses into the real world of the men and women who risk their lives battling fires and rescuing people in accidents. He asked them: Why are you willing to do such a dangerous job? How high do you feel when you save a life? How traumatic is it when you can't save someone? Almost every firefighter seemed haunted by something horrible they'd witnessed, like the death of a child. In his interview, Delsohn discovered that firefighters don't talk about their own bravery. It's not their style. They recall events with passion but without a lot of self promotion. They invariably say, "We were just doing our jobs."

5. American lives and property are protected by about 795,000 volunteer firefighters. Every year nearly 100,000 firefighters in the United States are injured in the line of duty. Another 100 or so die as a result of their efforts. That's not to mention occupational illnesses like lung diseases and the various cancers they get from inhaling toxic smoke.

Nationally, volunteer ranks have thinned about ten percent in the last ten years. Why? Greater training demands. In some volunteer departments, the training standards are actually higher than those in career departments. The ranks are also being thinned because of so many other time commitments. More and more Americans hold second jobs.

6. In the days following the fire a lot of us shared with one another what the loss of our church building meant to us. John Ware 4th reminded a journalist that "the building is not the church." "I noted," he said, "that on the night of the fire, a lot of people were crying and hugging each other - and not all of them were members of the church." Jennifer Gilbert was quoted as saying, "I remember staying here (at the church) late at night for choir practice. Probably the most vivid memory of the church I have is Christmas Eve when the church is lit by candlelight. Those are the things that hurt when you look back." Melissa Latham was 10 years old. "We won't have Sunday school here anymore," Melissa said. The day after the fire what

remained of the steeple was taken down. All of us wiped tears from our eyes as we watched the steeple fall.

7. After the fire I received a letter. The writer said, “the church and steeple means a great deal to us, to me in particular. I went to Sunday school and Bible school at the church. I flirted with the boys in the balcony during church services when I was a teenager, and I graduated from high school there. I was married there 45 years ago, and the funeral services for my mother and father were there. So we’ve come full circle.” Another letter said, “When I came to Oxford to apply for a teaching job in 1928 I was told to look for the steeple. I was given directions to get to the school from the steeple.”

8 The Wednesday after the fire we gathered on the green which belongs to the church. The entire town came out. We sang and prayed and thanked God that no one was hurt. The following Sunday Father Obenchain invited us to worship at St. Christopher’s Episcopal Church. Then Father Baldrick from Sacred Heart Roman Catholic Church came to me and said, “We want you to worship in our sanctuary. We’ll rearrange our masses.” For three summers and Christmas Eves we worshipped at Sacred Heart Church. They also fed us doughnuts, juice and coffee after the service. We worshipped one Sunday at the chapel at Lincoln University and, throughout the school year, we worshipped and had Sunday School at the High School. Dave Cederberg and others hauled all the Sunday School material to the high school in a trailer every week for three years.

9. The fire tested us. The fire brought us together. The fire helped us to realize that the church is people. St. Paul says we’ll all be tested as if by fire. We’ll go through the fire and flames of testing. But God promises to go with us. God was with the children of Israel in the fiery furnace of slavery in Egypt. God was with Shadrach, Meshech and Abednego in the fiery furnace in Babylon. The Lord was with the early church in the fiery furnace of Roman persecution. He was with the African American slaves in their fiery furnace of slavery and bondage. He was with the firefighters and our church. All of us will go through the fiery furnace of suffering, tragedy, and death, but God promises to go with us.

When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie,
My grace, all sufficient, shall be thy supply;
The flame shall not hurt thee; I only design
Thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine.

10. Last summer my family visited Williamsburg, Virginia. I was fascinated watching an apron clad blacksmith. Muscles rippled in his strong forearms (reminded me of Steve Hill). He put his tongs into the fire. He grasped the heated iron and placed it on his anvil. His eyes carefully examined the glowing iron. He imagined what he wanted the iron to become. He began to pound and pound. His left hand clutched the hot mass with the tongs. His right hand slammed the sledge hammer on the metal glowing with fire. Sparks flew. The shop rang with the sound of metal on metal, like Wagner's Anvil chorus. ~~The air filled with smoke and the~~ soften metal responded. Eventually a remarkable change occurred. The metal took shape. A perfectly formed horseshoe. Then he plunged the smoldering metal into a tub of water. The sound of hissing. Steam filled the workshop. And the metal immediately began to harden. Now it was something useful. Something beautiful. Because it had been through the fire and the water.

11. Ten years ago this weekend God used fire to melt us and to mold us. Last week we sang,

Spirit of the living God, Fall afresh on me;
Spirit of the living God, Fall afresh on me.
Melt me, mold me, Fill me, use me.
Spirit of the living God, Fall afresh on me.

Let us pray: Come Holy Spirit and baptize us with fire.
By the fire of your Spirit forge us into a church beautiful and useful for your kingdom.
Set our hearts aflame with a love for the truth and the desire to do your will.
May our witness to Christ burn brightly in lives of joyful discipleship.
Keep us faithful in your service until Christ comes in final victory
and we feast with all your saints in the joy of your eternal realm.
Through Christ, all glory and honor are yours, almighty Father, with the Holy Spirit in the holy church, now and forever. Amen.