

The Kingdom Now

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, on July 18, 1999. Scripture Lessons: Genesis 28:10-19a; Psalm 139; Romans 8:12-25; Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43.

139: 1-12, 23-24

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

Do you remember where you were and what you were doing thirty years ago on July 20, 1969? That's the day the Eagle landed in the Sea of Tranquility on the moon, the first manned moon landing. I don't know what I was doing. I was fresh out of Princeton Seminary, newly ordained, and had moved into my apartment in Portsmouth, Ohio where I had been called as the assistant minister of the Second Presbyterian Church. I was so busy getting unpacked and becoming familiar with my duties that I don't know what I was doing on that historic day. I do remember what I was doing a few days later when the Eagle departed from the moon. I had just received my first pay check. My top priority was to buy an FM stereo and record player. I traveled for two hours, from Portsmouth to Columbus to a hi-fi warehouse. While there I remembered that it was the day Buzz Aldrin, Neil Armstrong and Pete Conrad were going to blast off from the moon. I stood with a group of people looking at the TV in the store display room. We saw the image of the Eagle suddenly ascend and disappear from the screen kind of like Santa Claus disappearing up the chimney. Everybody in the room cheered. As a budding theologian I recalled the words of Psalm 139, "Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there." Thinking back on that event I might have also thought of our Old Testament lesson where Jacob dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, to top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And the LORD stood beside him. Later, Jacob said, "Surely God is in this place (the moon) and I did not know it." I think also of the great hymn, "I sing the mighty power of God." The last stanza says, "And everywhere that we can be, Thou, God, art present there."

I think of something that D.T. Niles said years ago. D.T. Niles was a native of Sri Lanka and a Christian, ordained in the Methodist church of Sri Lanka. He was also a missionary and evangelist. He wanted all people everywhere to recognize Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. And

yet he was not a proselytizer. He didn't put down the religious faith of others. He denounced Christian evangelists who spoke with arrogance and intimidated people with threats of hell and uprooted from the kingdom of God people who did not share their beliefs. It was D.T. Niles who gave us a wonderful definition of evangelism. "Evangelism is one beggar telling another beggar where to find the Bread of Life." Another thing that D.T. Niles said relates to our Psalm. He said that he never traveled any place to tell people about Jesus without discovering that Jesus had gotten there before him. Jesus had preceded him. As an evangelist he believed that the most important thing he could do is to point people to recognize where Jesus was already at work in their lives and in their communities, outside the church as well as inside the church.

All these thoughts crowd in on me as I think of our experience this past week in Dungannon, Virginia at our work mission project. We did not go to the Appalachians to take the message of Jesus. The message of Jesus had longed preceded us. We went to see how Jesus is working in others and in ourselves. We went to see how the risen Christ is at work in people of faith and in people of no faith. Nine of us went this year: Jim Sumner organized and took care of all the details. Jim Abel, Mark and Philip Atkinson, Tom Christos, Lorraine Holton, Helen Stewart, Carol Warner and I worked and lived and laughed together for most of last week. We got there last Saturday afternoon. After dinner, most of us went to the Carter Fold, about 30 miles away for a night of country and blue grass music and traditional Appalachian clog dancing. Carol Warner promised to give a demonstration this morning. I was struck with how the Bible and Christian faith is so deeply inbedded in Appalachian culture and music and stories.

Our work: We were suppose to begin our work on Monday but it rained hard all day. So some of us traveled for about an hour to a nearby town where we watched the newest Star Wars movie and got back in time for dinner. Tuesday, the weather got better and we got to work. The work we did was important and helpful. We spent two whole days working on a house trailer whose owner believed had leaks in the plumbing. She wanted us to fix the leaks, replace a hot water heater and insulate the underside of the trailer. We checked for plumbing leaks and found none. We did discover that whoever put the original insulation in put it in upside down with the vapor

barrier on the outside rather on the inside. With the vapor barrier on the wrong side, condensation built up around pipes and heating/cooling ducts causing dampness and giving rise to the idea that there was a plumbing leak. Since I spent two summers during college insulating houses, I got the job of crawling around in the mud amidst snails and wasps underneath the trailer on my back pulling off the old soaking wet insulation and putting in new dry insulation with the vapor barrier turned the right way. Helen, Carol and Lorraine cut the insulation to the desired sizes and handed the pieces into me. Philip and Mark and Tom Christos followed me, wiring up the insulation to keep it in place. Jim Abel fixed a leaking roof. And Jim Sumner checked all the plumbing, removed a hot water heater, found it to be in good shape and replaced it. But the most important part of the mission was sitting on the porch and listening to the owner, Robin Poole tell us about her life. She is suffering with cancer and has been traveling miles and miles to reach a hospital providing chemotherapy treatment. She is currently in remission.

I especially enjoyed sitting outside in the evening just talking and listening to one another. I think all of us who participated got to know and appreciate one another better as children of God.

Women of Faith The Dungannon mission not the only mission trip that took place last week. Five women, Kay Atkinson, Chris Higgins, Marylee Hogg, Kathy Lilley, and Anne Terry attended the Women of Faith conference Friday and Saturday, held in the Meadowlands in East Rutherford, NJ. Women of Faith is committed to helping women of all denominations, nationalities, age groups, and backgrounds grow emotionally, spiritually, and relationally. The purpose of the conference was to ignite the spark of spiritual renewal. I'm looking forward to hearing more from Kay and the others about their conference.

My hope and prayer is that each one of us will discover that God is in this place, Oxford Presbyterian Church. My hope and prayer is that God would open our eyes to see the presence of Christ everywhere we look in the world.

Dylan song: Somebody Touched Me ... it must have been the hand of the Lord