

Ken Thought This was one of my best

The Lord is Near

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the third Sunday of Advent, December 11, 1988. Scripture Lessons: Zephaniah 3:14-18a; Isaiah 12:2-6; Philippians 4:4-9; Luke 3:7-18.

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

In my first year of ministry in Porthsmouth, Ohio I was asked to conduct a grave side service for a little baby just a few weeks old. I didn't know the mother and father. They weren't members of our church, or of any church as far as I knew. When I got to the grave site there was no one there but the young mother and father and the undertaker. I remember it was a very cold day. It must have been in the teens. The wind was blowing fiercely and there was a thin cover of snow. I had the collar of my warm wool overcoat turn up to protect me from the cold but the young couple wore only dirty, wispy, spring jackets.

~~As soon as I got there the funeral director said he guessed we could~~ start. He opened the trunk of his car and took out a little tiny casket. I thought, "What in the world? That's no place to put a baby. That's a baby, not a piece of luggage." He tucked that little casket under his left arm and took it over to the freshly dug grave but just as he got there he slipped on some snow and that little casket fell to the ground with a thud and landed on its side. He got up and put the casket right side up and told us that he'd put it into the grave after we left.

The father couldn't have been more than twenty years old and he was drunk or almost drunk. I could also tell that he'd been crying. His nose was running. The nasal mucus hung down from his nose in a long thick string but he made no attempt to wipe it or blow his nose. Throughout the brief service he tottered back and forth and I expected him to fall over at any moment. The mother looked like she was only about 18. She was thin and pale. Her teeth were all black with rot which she tried to keep me

from noticing by speaking with her lips close together. She stood there expressionless in the wind and the cold looking, not at the casket, but above it and into the distance.

I felt terribly uneasy. These poor people were so unlike me, or so I thought. All I wanted to do was say a prayer and go. I began to read a few short passages of scripture... "As a father pities his children, so the Lord pities those who fear him. For he know~~s~~our frame; he remembers that we are dust." And words from St. Matthew, "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they were no more." And finally the words of our Lord, "Let not your hearts be troubled. You believe in God, believe also in me. In my father's house are many mansions...."

~~I don't remember what I said after that. I don't even know if I said~~ anything. All I can remember is that, unexpectedly, I became acutely aware of the presence of Christ. The Lord was near! He was there! He knew that a little baby had just died. He knew the sorrowing mother and father better than anyone else. Jesus wept. And I was ashamed that I hadn't really expected Jesus to be there. And he was reminding me of the infinite value of every one of his human family.

"The Lord is near!" Paul was in prison when he wrote that. Did he mean that the return of the Lord was close at hand? or was he thinking of the Psalmist who wrote, "The Lord is near to all those who call upon him." He probably had both ideas in mind. Scholars argue which idea was foremost in his mind but I don't think it really matters. But when I read those words I think of Psalm 139. "Whither shall I go from thy Spirit? Or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend to heaven, thou art there! If I make my bed in hell, thou art (even) there!"

Sometimes God feels far away, even at Christmas time. I roll out of bed at 6 am. I take a shower and shave, go down stairs and turn on the radio to see if the world is still out there. I fill the coffeemaker and while the coffee is brewing, I make three peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and pour cereal into five bowls. By then Kay, who's been getting ready for school, is at the table and soon after that the boys come down. We pause for about 10 seconds to thank God for the cereal and then we have spelling words to go over, a social studies test to study for. Someone drops a big blob of grape jelly on their pants that has to be cleaned up. There are piano lessons, beds to be made, breakfast dishes to be washed. Each of us goes about our assigned duties with the precision of a poorly made watch. We soon all go our separate ways. I have people to ~~visit, committees to go to, letters to write, sermons to prepare, or~~ classes to teach. The Lord doesn't seem near. The Lord seems to get pushed out once more into the stable especially at Christmas time.

For some people the difficulty never arises. God always feels near to them. I envy them. But for many Christians the life of faith is more of a struggle. For many, faith that the Lord is near is more often believed in our heads than felt in our hearts. There are times when we're vitally aware of God's presence but there are so many other times when he seems agonizingly absent. Sudden sorrow or tragedy may rob us of faith for a time. Yet even when we're not facing such adversities, the flame of faith doesn't always burn brightly. The experience of the absence of God is often a real one.

But the message of Christmas is that God is near, as near as a child born as I was born; as near as one who shares with me a glass of wine and a loaf of bread when I'm tired and hungry; as near as water that washes me

and which I drink to quench my thirst; as near as one who passes through the experience of death as I will have to do one day. This is how the Lord is near. Whether I think about it or not, whether I believe it or not, whether I feel it or not makes no difference. The Lord is near!

I sometimes ask myself, "What comes first? Must I first believe and experience a sense of the nearness of the Lord before I can rejoice in the Lord and be free from worry and pray with thanksgiving? Or may I come to experience how near the Lord is if I *first* rejoice in the Lord and act as though Jesus really is Lord and pray even when I don't feel like it?" I'll leave the answer to that to those who love theological controversy. But it seems to me that it can work both ways by God's grace. Here's the secret of every real worship service. Perhaps in the singing, perhaps simply in ~~sitting with the others, even if we can't remember any of the sermon, we~~ might see a tiny particle of the light of his presence.

There was a little boy about four years old who was always full of questions. He came to church every Sunday with his mother and he knew the minister pretty well. One day he asked his mother, "Does Rev. Hills speak to God?" And when his mother said, "Yes", the boy asked, "How does he do it? Do the firemen help him up on their long ladders?"

That might sound like a fairly reasonable idea to a four year old boy or girl, but we sophisticated adults know we can't reach heaven with ladders- you can't even reach the moon that way. Yet I've touched the moon. I really have. I didn't go to the moon- the astronauts brought it to me. Years ago, back in the late 60s and early 70s our astronauts brought back rocks from the moon which are now in the Air and Space museum in Washington, D.C. The summer before last we visited that museum and I actually touched a piece of the moon!

It's just like this with the Lord- we don't need to go to heaven to be near to God, he comes to us. Jesus has brought God down to us. And at Christmas time we remember that the Lord came to be near everyone. If you want to touch the moon, Washington D.C. is the nearest place I know. But if you want to be in touch with Jesus, you can do it just where you are because the Lord is near.

Let us pray: Father, in this wonderful season of the year there's so often a lot of anxiety; anxiety about money and whether we've bought enough gifts for loved ones and anxiety over how we're going to pay off our debts. And there are so many who have not received the gift of your Son that you've given us. As we continue to rejoice in the Lord in music and as we make our requests known to you by our prayers and supplications with thanksgiving let your peace which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. And, above all, may we all, as a child, ask Christ into our hearts and receive the gift of Christmas. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

REAL LOUD -
SHOUT IT OUT



I light this Advent candle to call to our minds that God, who came in Christ and whose Spirit comes to each seeking heart, has promised that Christ will come again, victor over sin and death.