

The Lord Is Near

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on December 11, 1994, the Third Sunday in Advent. Scripture Lessons: Zephaniah 3:14-20; Isaiah 12:2-6; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18.

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

"The Lord is near!" the apostle Paul wrote. ~~"Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God."~~ Let me tell you about an experience that really brought home the truth of those words to me. I was in my first year of ministry in Portsmouth, Ohio. On very short notice, I was asked to conduct a grave-side service for a little baby, just a few days old. I didn't know the mom and dad. They weren't members of our church. They weren't members of any church as far as I knew.

When I got to the grave site the mom and dad and undertaker were the only ones there. No grandparents. No friends. It was a bitterly cold day. Snow lay on the ground. The temperature must have been in the teens and the cold wind swept across the bare cemetery.

The mom and dad were poor Appalachian mountain people. They stood trembling, wearing only dirty, wispy, spring jackets. The dad looked to be about 19 years old and I could smell alcohol on his breath. His eyes, bloodshot. His nose was running and it was hanging in a long thick string to below his chin but he made no attempt to wipe or blow his nose. Throughout the brief service he tottered back and forth. I expected him to fall over at any moment. The mother looked to be about 15 years old, a thin wisp of a girl. She spoke with her lips close together to hide her teeth which were black with rot. She wore no expression on her face. She

stood looking, not at the casket, but above it and into the distance.

The funeral director opened the trunk of his car and took out a little tiny casket. I was appalled. "What in the world" I thought. "That's no place to put a baby. That's a baby, not a piece of luggage." He tucked the little casket under his arm and took it to the freshly dug grave. But just as he got there he slipped on some snow and the casket fell to the ground with a thud and landed on its side. He got up, dusted the snow off, and put the casket right side up.

I felt so anxious. I felt so lonely. God seemed so far away. I began the service. I read a few short passages of Scripture from our Book of Common Worship. "As a father pities his children, so the Lord pities those who fear him. For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust." And from the Gospel of Matthew I read, "A voice was heard, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they were no more." And finally the words of Jesus on the night he was betrayed, "Let not your hearts be troubled. You believe in God, believe also in me. In my father's house are many mansions." As I read those words I became acutely aware of the presence of the risen Christ. "The Lord is near!" I thought. "He's right here! I see the Lord standing, grieving, shivering, weeping before me in the cold."

"The Lord is near!" Paul wrote those words from a Roman prison cell. He was charged with illegally preaching the Gospel, chained to a Roman soldier. No freedom! No privacy! He did not know what the future held for him, whether life or death. A real possibility that he'd be executed. Despite all these uncertainties

Paul writes to the Christians in Philippi, "The Lord is near." "Near - right here in ~~my~~ prison cell ~~with me~~ Near - even though I'm facing death!" "And the Lord is near to you Philippian Christians also. Near! Near enough to speak to in a whisper.

You can thank the Lord. You can ask the Lord to give you strength. The Lord is near - rejoice!
Thank no hard -
- let your requests be made known to God."

In much better circumstances I often don't feel that the Lord is near. Sometimes God feels far away. I roll out of bed at six in the morning, ^I and wake up the boys for school. I take a shower and shave. I go down stairs and turn on the radio to see if the world is still out there. There's coffee and oatmeal to make, beds to make, teeth to ~~be~~ brushed, last minute homework to complete, clothes to put in the washer and dishes to wash. Kay and the boys and I each go about our assigned tasks with the precision of a poorly made watch. Soon we're out the door and go our separate ways. I have people to visit, letters to write, sermons to prepare, committees to attend. In all the hustle and bustle the Lord doesn't seem near.

For some people ~~the difficulty never arises~~ God always feels near to them. I envy them. But for many, the life of faith is more of a struggle. For many of us, faith that the Lord is near is more often believed in our heads than felt in our hearts. ^{Sometimes} ~~There are times when~~ we're vitally aware of God's presence but ~~there are~~ ^{Sometimes} ~~so many other times when~~ he seems agonizingly absent. For example, three years ago at this time my mother died. Two years ago, in December, Kay's sister, Lucy, died. And this year Kay's father may not live to Christmas. If the Lord is really

near why doesn't he heal the sick and raise the dead as Jesus did when he walked the roads of Palestine? Is God near but unable? Is God near but unwilling? Or is ^{Paul wrong?} God far away and unconcerned about us? Christian believers struggle with these questions. But faith holds fast the promise, "The Lord is near!"

That's the message of Christmas. The Lord is near - as near as a child born like us. The Lord is near - as near as a friend who shares a cup of wine and loaf of bread with us. The Lord is near - as near as water that washes us and quenches our thirst. The Lord is near as the Good Shepherd who walks ~~with us~~ through the valley of the shadow of death with us. When ^{we} think about the Lord ~~or~~ when ^{we} don't, the Lord is near. When ^{we} believe God's promise and when ^{we} no longer can believe - still, the Lord is near. When ^{we} feel the Lord's presence and when ^{we} do not feel it - the Lord is near.

I sometimes ask myself, "What comes first? Must we first believe in the nearness of the Lord before we can rejoice and pray? Or do we first rejoice and pray before we experience how near the Lord is?"

It seems to me it can work both ways. It's easier to rejoice and pray when we know that the Lord is near. But when you don't feel the Lord is near, when you can't rejoice - make your supplications known to the Lord, thank the Lord for whatever blessings you have, pray in faith to the Lord who is near even when you don't feel it. There are few things more important in life than knowing and believing ^{and acting on the promise} that the Lord is near. The joys of life are incomplete unless we recognize that the Lord is near to thank. The pains and disappointments of life are

made more bearable when we know the Lord is near to share our grief.

When I was about four years old I felt that the moon was very near. There was a full moon one night. It looked so large and near. "Come to the window and look at the moon, daddy!" I said. He came and stood beside me and we looked for awhile. Then he said, "Let's go outside." We went out in the back yard and gazed up at the moon that looked so near. Then he hoisted me to his shoulders, held my legs tightly, pointed to the moon and said to me, "The moon is near tonight, Teddy. Reach for the moon! See if you can touch the moon, Teddy." And I stretched to touch the moon. I almost touched it! I was so excited! I told my dad, "Stand on your tippy toes!" And he stood on his tippy toes. And I stretched and reached and came within a hair's breadth of touching the moon. I could almost feel its cratered surface. The moon was so near when I was four years old.

The moon seems far away to me today. As an adult I know the moon isn't near. It's 230,000 miles away. I can't reach it from my dad's shoulders. I can't reach it from the highest mountain. And yet I've actually touched the moon! Several years ago Kay and I took the boys down to the Air and Space Museum and we each touched a piece of the moon brought back by astronauts ~~years ago~~.

When we were children many of us felt God's nearness. God was very near. God was very real. But maybe, as we grew older, we moved farther and farther ~~away~~ from the Lord until one day we realized we hadn't rejoiced in the Lord for years. We hadn't prayed. We hadn't made our requests and thanksgiving known to the Lord. The Lord seemed as far away as the moon. Farther! And maybe a crisis

came into our lives and we thought of God. Maybe we reached up to God in our desperation but we couldn't touch him. The truth is, we can't touch God by reaching up. God is too far away. Nor can astronauts get to God in rocket ships.

But the Gospel tells us that the Lord came down to earth to be near us. God came ~~down to earth~~ in Jesus ~~Christ~~ to be near us. We don't need to go to heaven to be near God. The great God who created this vast universe came down to us. God in Christ came down to earth and ate and drank with us. He blessed the children, healed the sick, bound up the brokenhearted. He ate with outcasts, forgave sinners. He called us to repent and believe the gospel.

The Lord is still near us. He speaks to us in Scripture. He comes to us in the water of baptism and the bread and wine of Holy Communion. We see his face in the sick and the poor and the naked and imprisoned. The Lord is near! If you want to touch the moon, Washington, D.C. is the nearest place to go. But if you want ~~to touch with~~ Jesus, you can do it just where you are because the Lord is near.

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... so many in this town and perhaps even in this congregation. 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 ask the Lord who is near into our hearts and receive the gift of Christmas. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.