

The Mountain of the House of the Lord

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A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the first Sunday of Advent, December 3, 1989. Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 2:1-5; Psalm 122; Romans 13:11-14; Matthew 24:36-44.

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

Last week I bought a cassette tape entitled "Great Music from Great Occasions at Westminster Abbey." I took the tape home and played it just before I started working on my sermon. One of the first anthems was a musical setting for Psalm 122. "I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord!'" I stopped working on my sermon and just listened. And as I listened I began to sob.

I began to sob because I was thinking of our new church and how glad I'll be when they say, "Let us go into the house of the Lord." As I listened to that music I had a vision of our new church on the day of its consecration. I saw all of Oxford standing outside the new church. I saw the ministers of Oxford standing together to participate in the processional. I saw our choir joined with members of other choirs who'd been invited to participate in this special service. I also saw the faces of strangers, people from well beyond Oxford. I saw representatives from the Presbytery, Synod and General Assembly. I saw senators and congressmen. I saw the news media from Lancaster and Philadelphia.

The doors of the church swung opened. I can't remember what the church looked like or where it was located but it had a center aisle. The procession entered singing, "The churches one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord." Leading the procession was someone (I don't know who) carrying, in outstretched arms, a large pulpit Bible symbolizing the central importance of the Word of God in our worship. Then came the choir, followed by the ministers and people filling the sanctuary to

overflowing. The worship service began with the choir singing, "I was glad when they said unto me, let us go into the house of the Lord."

You say, "It sounds a bit overdone, I mean with senators and congressman and the news media." Maybe so, but that's what I saw.

I wonder what people thought when Isaiah shared with them his vision of the future. "The mountain of the house of the Lord will be the tallest mountain in the world", Isaiah proclaimed. Now, Isaiah was talking about Mt. Zion on which the city of Jerusalem and the temple were built.

Listen to the mockers, "Come on now, Isaiah, you know as well as we do that the mountain of the house of the Lord isn't even the tallest mountain in Palestine."

But Isaiah is undaunted. He continues, "and all the nations shall flow to it, and many peoples shall come."

Laughter drowns out Isaiah's voice. "Ridiculous! Assyria and Babyon abandoning their gods and coming to Jerusalem to learn the ways of the God of Jacob; this little nation that's a pawn in the hands of mighty empires?"

Despite the disbelief, the words of Isaiah were written down and the amazing thing is that his vision has been remembered for nearly 3000 years.

"It shall come to pass in the latter days," Isaiah says. It might not come to pass today. It might not come to pass tomorrow. It may not come to pass in my lifetime or in the lifetime of anyone now living. But it shall come to pass that "the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it."

Isaiah saw the temple placed at the summit of the highest of all

mountains. Christians see in this prophecy a vision of the relationship of the church to the rest of the world. The church, like the Old Testament temple, is the visible presence of the Lord in the world. The Church is present wherever the Word of God is proclaimed and the Sacraments celebrated. Isaiah's vision implies that the church isn't to withdraw from the world. It's not to hide from the world or ignore the world. Rather the church is to be like a city set on a hill, a light for the nations, highly visible.

"What an exaggerated sense of the church's important", you say. Maybe so, but read the news. In Communist East Germany- officially atheist for forty years- the Lutheran churches are packed on Monday evening for prayer, not just Sunday for the worship service, but Monday for prayer. The first non-communist member of the East German parliament - a Lutheran pastor! There's a religious revival in the Soviet Union. The Russian Orthodox church doesn't have enough priests. Gorbachev visits the Pope in Rome and says that the Soviet people have changed their attitude toward religion "which, (he said), we used to treat in a simplistic manner." Would you have believe this could happen 5 years ago?

Gorbachev and President Bush are going to the summit. Henry Kissinger is talking about massive arms reduction. In the light of massive federal deficits, Republicans and Democrats are saying, "We can't afford war no more."

Isaiah saw a day in which the nations of the world would walk in the light of the Lord... a day in which "nation shall not lift up swords against nation, neither shall they learn war any more." Has that day come? I don't know. "Of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but the Father only," Jesus said. "But", Jesus continued, "you must be

ready."

Are we ready for the coming of the Son of Man? Are we ready for the coming of the Prince of Peace? What if the Lord is, even now, establishing his reign of everlasting peace? Are we ready? The Berlin wall is coming down. The Eastern bloc nations are shaking off the yoke of communism. The Baltic states and many of the republics within the Soviet Union are demanding more and more autonomy.

The title of a book written years ago by Arthur Koestler describes what's happening, "The God that failed". So many people in the Soviet block nations sense that their gods have failed... their economic policies have failed... their political processes have failed... and they're seeking the Lord.

But there's no room for smugness on our part. Our gods too will fail. Last Thursday evening Paul Houseknecht and Jim Abel took six people in the confirmation class to Philadelphia. They helped feed the hungry. They saw homeless people. In a nation of so many hungry and homeless people can we say that we're walking in the ways of the Lord? Maybe we too should pray that our gods will fail so that our nation might learn the ways of the Lord and walk in his paths.

Christians believe the Word of God. We don't believe the Bible is a book of fairy-tales and myths. We hear the *Lord* speaking to us in the words of the prophet Isaiah. And because we believe, we *hope* - we hope for a world in which, one day, "nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more." We share the gospel with all men and women because we believe that it's not the will of the Father that any should perish, but that all should have eternal life. We work for peace and reconciliation in the world because we believe ^{That, one day, swords will} be beaten into plowshares.

What we hope for affects the future. John Newton...
The biblical word for peace is ~~shalom~~, a word we translate as peace, Christ came to save the world... some individuals may be lost but the world will be saved. The world is like a tree... some branches might be broken off but no tree will be saved. A New Theology... a kind of modernism... The world is a sinking ship... The world is a tree about

only it means much more than what we usually call peace. Peace is a life charged with joy, health, and love. When you read in the book of Revelation that God will "wipe away every tear from their eyes and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore," you get at least a negative hint of what the Bible means by peace. I

Lewis Smedes, a Christian Reformed Minister and Professor, once asked his class, "How many of you want to go to heaven when you die? Raise your hands." Everybody put their hands up. Then he asked, "How many of you would like to go to heaven today?" All the hands went down very quickly. Most people wanted to put heaven off for a while.

Then he asked them, "Would you like to see the world set straight, today. Would you like to see the nations of the world walking in the light of the Lord? There'd be no second class citizens. Prisoners and slaves would be free; hungry people would have plenty; homeless people would have a home. No one would lift a finger to harm another; and we'd all be at peace with everyone, especially with ourselves. Our nationalist swords would be beaten into international plows, and we'd all have peace at last. No more tears, no more cancer, no more death."

"Would you like to see that tomorrow?" he asked. Everybody raised their hands. And then Smedes said, "If a new world tomorrow is what you really want, then you really do want to go to heaven. But if that's not what you long for, then you really don't want to go to heaven." For when the Bible speaks of heaven it's talking about where God's will is done.

The Christian hope has eyes on this world. This is the world God made, the world to which he sent his Son, not to condemn it, but to save it. God will be its magnetic center one day. Jesus will be its Lord. And all who live in it will perfectly praise its Maker and Redeemer. "Come, let us

walk in the light of the Lord."

Let us pray: God be merciful unto us, and bless us; and cause thy face to shine upon us; that thy way may be known upon earth, thy saving health among all nations. Let the people praise thee, O God; let all the people praise thee. O let the nations be glad and sing for joy; for thou shalt judge the people righteously, and govern the nations upon earth. Let the people praise thee, O GOD; let all the people praise thee. Then shall the earth yield her increase; and God, even our own GOD, shall bless us. God bless us; and may all the ends of the earth fear thee. Amen.