

The Sins of the Fathers

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on Maundy Thursday, March 31, 1994: Scripture Lessons: Exodus 12:1-14; Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; John 13:1-17. 31b-35.

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

Many of us here tonight are parents. And if we aren't a parent, all of us are somebody's children. We all know that a parent can't keep their problems to ourselves. If we have a problem with alcohol or drugs, it's not just our problem, it affects our family too. If we swear frequently, it's not just our choice of words. It quickly becomes our children's choice of words too. If we're prejudiced against people from other nationalities and ethnic groups, our children become prejudiced just as we are. If money is the most important thing in our life, it will become the most important thing to our children too (See Nederhood, The Covenant Connection). The sins of the fathers are visited on our own children. Our children suffer because of our sins. We suffer because of our parents sin.

When the Angel of Death passed over Egypt, the sins of the fathers were being visited on their innocent children. Remember how, years before, the fathers of those Egyptian children began the spiral of killing by killing Jewish babies. They sowed death and now, on the night of Passover, they reap death.

Remember also that God promised deliverance to all who obeyed his voice and sacrificed a lamb and applied the blood to their doors. The promise was for Jews and Egyptians. No one in all Egypt needed to die on that night. But the Egyptian parents didn't apply the medicine; didn't seek protection for their children. They left their children vulnerable like parents who refuse to let their kids be inoculated against whooping cough and polio. So Egyptian children died.

The spiral of death and killing goes on today in the Middle East and around the world. Jews kill Palestinians. Palestinians kill Jews. Someone has said that the first casualty in every war is Truth but maybe the first casualty is children. Children are the first to suffer when adults can't settle our disputes peaceably. Isn't this what's happening today around the world? Children suffer and die because of the foolishness of their parents who refuse to be reconciled to their enemies. Children suffer from the neglect of their parents. The spiral of violence sucks us all downward. The death of those innocent Egyptian babies reminds us of all the deaths of all the children who've died as a result of the sins of their parents.

I was appalled to read that -

-By middle school, the average child has seen 8,000 murders and 100,000 acts of violence on TV and in the movies.

-Teenagers are victims of 3 out of 10 violent crimes.

-For every 100,000 people between the ages of 16-19, 54.3 black males and 8.7 white males die from murder; 12.6 black females and 3.4 white females die from murder.

-More teens die as a result of gunfire than from all natural diseases combined.

-A child dies from gunshot wounds every 3 hours.

-A day in the life of Americas' children, according to the Children's Defense Fund, includes 1,016 abortions.

The Angel of Death flies over our town and cities tonight. Tonight and tomorrow men, women, and children whom God loves will suffer because of the sins of their parents.

There's an old story Jewish rabbis have told for thousands of years. The Angel of Death reports back to God after visiting the land of Egypt with death. "Mission accomplished. I've executed your judgments. I've struck down the first born of Egypt." And the Angel of Death waits to be commended for his obedience. Instead God is silent. The Angel of Death sees tears streaming down God's face. "Why are you weeping? Why these tears?" the Angel asks. And the Lord says, "Those Egyptian children were my children too." When the father of the little girl killed in the Alabama tornado was asked if he thought his daughter's death was God's will, he answered. "No! I believe that God is weeping with us."

When we read the Passover story, if we're Christians, we can't help thinking of Calvary and the death of God's Son, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. The Cross tells us, for one thing, that God knows what it's like to lose a child. God weeps with the death of every child. Christ on the cross discloses the power of sin in our own lives and the destructive power of evil in the world.

Second, the Cross of Christ reveals to us that God intends to end this insane spiral of death and violence. On the Cross, God, in Christ, says, "The Buck stops here. God, in Christ, has taken upon himself all the death and violence and bloodshed of the world. Never again may we avenge the death of our loved ones. The death of Christ spells the death of death for the world.

Third, the cross of Christ marks the beginning of a new creation, a new year, a new day in the life of the world. We who claim Christ as our Passover Lamb and come to the Table to partake of our Passover Lamb are saying that we're members of a new world order where vengeance and bloodshed and violence have no place.

Outside, the Angel of Death passes over the world, taking the lives of children in Palestine and Bosnia and South Africa and Northern Ireland. But at the Lord's Table prejudice and hatred have no place. We're the beginning of a new creation. God delivers us from the kingdom of death to the kingdom of life through his dear Son. We're a new Israel. In drinking this cup and breaking this bread we say "No!" to hatred and bloodshed and death and destruction. We say "No!" to the idea that we can ever settle our differences through violence and death and bloodshed.

At the Lord's Table we weep with God for all his and our lost children. We weep with God on the death of his only begotten Son, Jesus. But we also rejoice at the Lord's Table. We claim God's protection for our children and for the children of the world. At the Lord's Table we claim God's grace and forgiveness and salvation for us and for our children and for the church and for the whole world.

Almighty God, look with mercy on your family for whom our Lord Jesus Christ willing to be betrayed and to be given over to the hands of sinners and to suffer death on the cross; who now lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.