

Waiting

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on November 27, 1994, the First Sunday in Advent. Scripture Lessons: Jeremiah 33:14-16; Psalm 25:1-10; 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13; Luke 21:25-36.

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

"Nations will be in anguish and perplexity. Men will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming." There've been times in my life when I've felt that anguish and perplexity to some degree; when I've been frightened and apprehensive about what's coming. I felt it sometimes as a little boy when my mom and dad didn't get home until much later than expected. I feared losing them. I felt it as a older boy before piano recitals at the Dubarry Room of the Hotel DuPont in Wilmington. I felt it as a young man before final exams at college and seminary. As an adult I've felt it, waiting for the results of some medical exam for which I had reason to expect the worst. I feel it as an adult when one of my sons hasn't gotten home and it's late and I hear the ambulance siren wailing on the way to an accident. I feel it when the telephone rings at 3 in the morning and I hear the sound of someone weeping on the other end of the line. Fear! Apprehension! Anguish!

But what I've felt doesn't compare to what so many others have experienced. All of us have experienced the "blues" at times, but some people experience anxiety, perplexity, terror and fear so much more intensely. I think of William Styron, the author, or the humorist, Art Buchwald, who have written about their deep periods of depression when they've come close to giving up and taking their own life.

Jesus spoke of anxiety, perplexity, fear, and apprehension on a world-wide scale - even on a cosmic scale. Even the heavenly bodies will be shaken. Jesus was talking about ^{signs that would precede} the last judgment. He was talking about the end of the world. He was talking about the second coming of Christ.

There's probably no part of the Christian Faith more alien to our age than this doctrine of a second coming, this dream of the return of the crucified and risen Christ, and the appearance of the kingdom of God. I suppose it's so alien because of the bizarre imagery of signs in the sun, moon and stars, the roaring seas that threaten to inundate the civilized world, and the Son of Man coming on clouds; imagery that sounds so weird to our scientific world. I suppose it's so alien, also, because of all the weirdoes and crack-pots who lead their followers to mountain tops to await the end of the world or, worse yet, execute mass murder and suicide as recently took place in Canada and Switzerland by the Solar Temple cult. But it may be that we find this imagery of the second coming of Christ, and the coming of the kingdom of God, and the promise of our redemption so alien because it's so hopeful. We live in a world where many people have lost all hope for themselves or for this world.

There was a time when the secular world had hope. Communists preached a hope of a classless society that would come without God by natural law. Capitalism preached about the wealth of nations that would come without the help of God through the opening up of free markets and the abolition of government interference. But the secular hope of inevitable progress has pretty much be

abandoned. Many people now preach that things are getting worse and worse with crime and drugs and anarchy in sexual relationships. The environment may be beyond repair. The earth won't be able to sustain burgeoning populations. There are even fears of cosmic catastrophes - of comets or meteors crashing into our atmosphere and destroying the world as we know it.

Many people escape the hopelessness of secularism by a flight into a purely individualist faith in survival after death. They abandon hope for this world. They give up in the face of poverty, in the face of environmental pollution, in the face of holocausts. They retreat into a purely personal, private, individualistic faith that can be practiced ^{and the sacraments;} apart from God's people and apart from following Christ in this world in proclaiming the reign of God. *in word and deed.*

The Bible, however, tells us that God has entered into a covenant with us. God, in Christ, has made a commitment to us. The God who came to us in Jesus Christ won't abandon us. God has a purpose for us. I think of people who heard these words of Jesus in the centuries immediately following Christ's life, death and resurrection. The Roman Empire was crumbling. Civilization was under attack. The pagan gods had failed and were powerless. The Roman legions were powerless to protect the eternal city. Everything that so many people had taken for granted was falling apart. Everything that people had counted on was failing. The sun was setting on civilization. And into this dark world the gospel of Jesus Christ came, "Stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

Jesus didn't promise that we'd be spared anxiety and perplexity and anguish. He frankly told us to expect these things. Jesus didn't preach an escapist gospel. Scary, perplexing and even terrifying things will happen to this world and to us. Our faith may be tested to the breaking point. We may experience perplexity: the loss of loved ones, divorce, disappointments. We may experience things which simply can't be explained; when all we can do is ask, "Why, Lord!" There'll be things that happen to us over which we have little control. When these things happen we are greatly tempted to give up hope. And when we lose hope, we give up - we give up on our commitments, we give up on others, we give up on our world, we give up on ourselves. But Jesus says, "Never give up hope. How can you possibly give up hope if you trust in me? When these things happen to you, "stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

We are people who believe the Gospel. If you don't believe the Gospel, there's a good chance that you're hear this morning because you want to believe the good news - or you once did. As God's people we believe that God has made a commitment to us which God will never go back on. We believe that God gives us hope through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. The gospel tells us the story of a God who has come to us in Jesus Christ, born in a stable. The gospel tells us the story of the God who has so utterly committed himself to us that he chose to die and descend into hell so that none of us need ever descend there. No matter what our faith or doubt or disbelief may be, the ultimate question is whether God is committed to us. And the answer of the gospel to that question is,

“Yes!”

For the last two years I've been working out at the YMCA three days a week. I'm making some progress on the Stairmaster. I started on level three for five minutes and now I've worked up to level ten for forty-five minutes. But there've been times when I've almost given up. Every day I go to the Y I make a conscious choice to go. There've been times when I'm half-way through the work-out, my legs feel like lead, my heart's pounding, I'm feeling faint, my head droops, I shift my weight from my legs to my arms, I feel myself sinking. I feel like giving up and throwing in the towel. Then I stand up and lift up my head. I see the clock on the wall. The time is at hand. There'll be an end. My redemption is drawing near. And I have hope to go on.

When we feel the anguish and perplexity that comes over so many of us, “stand up”, Jesus says. “Lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” When we feel faint from terror, and apprehensive of what's coming on the world, “stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” When your world is falling apart and everything that you once depended on has been found to be untrustworthy “stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” Don't give up! Don't give up! Never, never give up!

Let us pray: Faithful God, your promises stand unshaken through all generations. Renew us in hope, that we may be awake and alert watching for the glorious return of Jesus Christ, our judge and savior, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.