

BURNED BUT NOT CONSUMED

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 27th Sunday in Ordinary Time, October 6, 1996. Scripture Lessons: Exodus 3:1-12; Matthew 3:1-2, 11.

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

This morning we gather to praise the Lord for preserving us for the seven years we've been without a sanctuary. We know from personal experience all about bushes that burn and are not consumed.

For centuries the burning bush has been a symbol of Christ's church. It's a symbol of ancient Israel in the furnace of affliction in Egypt and yet not consumed. The story reminds us of Shadrach, Meshech and Abednego who were thrown into the fiery furnace and yet preserved. The burning bush reminds us of the Holy Spirit that descended upon the early church in the form of tongues of fire and enabled the church to survive in the furnace of persecution. The emblem of the Presbyterian Church of Scotland is a burning bush with the motto, "Burned, but not consumed." On the logo of our own denomination, the Presbyterian Church (USA), the burning bush appears. The kind of church that God wants is a church on fire with the flame of the Holy Spirit and yet not consumed.

One mark of a church that burns and yet isn't consumed is evangelism. A famous missionary once defined evangelism as one beggar telling another beggar where to find the Bread of Life. A church that burns and yet isn't consumed calls people to believe and follow Jesus Christ as the Bread of Life.

Last Sunday I attended the installation service for the Rev. Dr. Randolph Riggs at First Presbyterian Church in Lancaster. I

heard Tom Long preach. He told us what happened one morning in the little church he attended when he was a child in Georgia. It was a hot summer day and all the windows in the church were wide open to catch whatever breeze there was. The congregation had just celebrated Holy Communion. The minister took the tray of bread from the elders and set it down on the Communion Table. Then he picked up the tray again, turned to the congregation, and said, "Has everybody been fed?" He'd never asked that question before. It wasn't part of the liturgy. Nobody responded. He placed the bread back on the table, then picked it up and asked again, "Has everybody been fed?"

The congregation got very quiet. And in the stillness, he began to hear sounds of the world outside began to hear - the cry of a baby in the distance, dogs barking, two people arguing on the corner, a fire siren. The sounds of the world outside wafted into the sanctuary telling him that not everybody had been fed. There's a hungry world outside the sanctuary. And God has called us - the church - to feed the world outside the sanctuary with the Bread of Life.

Praise God for this sanctuary. But don't let the sanctuary deafen us to the hungry world outside. Let the fire of the Holy Spirit spread until everyone in Oxford sees this great sight, a church on fire and yet not consumed. Let the fire of the Holy Spirit spread until all the people in Oxford, and in the world, find the Bread of Life in Jesus Christ.

Let us pray: Come Holy Spirit. Fall upon us. Set us on fire. May we boldly proclaim this good news, by the words of our mouths and the deeds of our lives, rejoicing always that you preserve us even as we burn with the fire of your Holy Spirit; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.