

AFTER THE FLOOD: CITY OF GOD

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church on the Third Sunday in Lent, March 23, 2003.
Exodus 20:1-17; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25; John 2:13-22

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

I will not be giving the sermon I originally planned to give. Instead I'll be giving a sermon appropriate to the occasion of war with Iraq. I have chosen for my text: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me."

I want you to try to imagine what the world was like nearly 1600 years ago - in the year AD 410. Most people, understandably, don't have a good idea of what has happened in ancient history. But I believe, as John Mackay, has said, "The way to tomorrow leads through yesterday." To put it another way, we don't know where to go unless we have some idea of where we've been. So I want you to imagine what the world was like in the year A.D. 410, nearly 1600 years ago. An event happened that year that continues to influence us to this day.

Most of us have no idea what the world was like 1600 years ago so let me put the date of AD 410 in historical perspective. Imagine a time before George Washington and the Revolutionary War in the 18th century, before Martin Luther and the Reformation of the 16th century, before Columbus in the late 15th century, before the Crusades in the 11th, 12th, and 13th centuries, before the Viking invasions and the Dark Ages of 9th century, before the rise of Islam in the 7th century, before the fall of the Western Roman Empire late in the 5th century. Hopefully that time line will give you some kind of historical perspective.

Now what's the significance of the year A.D. 410 and how does it relate to what's happening today? In the year AD 410, the Roman Empire was the only super power in the world -- just like, today, we're the only super power. But in that year, AD 410, terrorists struck in the very heart of the empire. Terrorists struck Rome. Historic buildings were leveled. Thousands of Romans were killed, like what happened on September 11. The Roman Empire was shaken to its foundations. How could this have happened? Never before had Rome been so devastated. Many people believed that the city of Rome, the capital of the empire, was an "eternal city" just like some people, today, might believe that the United States of America will be eternal. Rome would stand forever. At that time the Roman Empire stretched from Great Britain in the northwest, to Iraq in the East, and

to the entire northern coast of Africa. It had ruled the world for over 500 years. People couldn't imagine a world not ruled by the Roman Empire.

People were asking why these terrorist attacks happened in A.D. 410. They were looking for explanations. Just as two and a half years ago people were asking how September 11 could have happened. Some of the leading citizens of the Roman Empire blamed the terrorist attacks on the anger of the pagan gods. The pagan gods were angry – Jupiter, Mars, Venus – like a jealous husband who punishes his wife for leaving him for another lover, the pagan gods were angry and were punishing the people of Rome. Pagan temples had been abandoned. Few people were making sacrifices any longer to the gods. Therefore the pagan gods were abandoning the empire and allowing terrorists to threaten its security. Romans had abandoned the pagan Gods for a powerless crucified Palestinian Jew named Jesus.

One hundred years before A.D. 410 the emperor Constantine had been preparing for an important battle for the control of the Empire. One night Constantine saw a vision, a sign in the clouds - a cross with the words "In This Sign Conquer". The next morning Constantine gathered his troops and commanded them to paint crosses on their shields. He told his soldiers to go into battle and conquer in the name of Christ. Constantine gained a brilliant victory at the battle of the Milvian Bridge and became sole ruler of the Roman Empire. From that time on Christianity, once an outlawed and persecuted religion became more and more popular until it was eventually made the officially sanctioned religion of the empire. But when the city of Rome itself was struck in AD 410 many people questioned the wisdom of abandoning the pagan gods. They questioned the power of Christ to protect them and many returned to the old pagan gods.

In response to the terrorist attack in A.D. 410, a Christian Bishop living in North Africa (now Algeria) began writing a book - probably the most influential book of the next thousand years. He entitled his book, The City of God, a thousand page book that took him about ten years to complete. In the book he answered the accusations that the terrorist attacks were brought about by Romans abandoning their pagan beliefs. Through an examination of Roman history he showed his readers how the pagan gods had, time after time, let down the people of Rome.

Furthermore, he said that human history has been the tale of two cities – the Earthly City of Man, which is destined for destruction, and the City of God, which exists now by faith but will eventually encompassed the whole world. The City of Man, Augustine said, is based on love of self and hatred of God. On the other hand, the City of God is based on self-denial and the love for God and neighbor. The earthly city is doomed to failure because it worships military power and failed gods, but the City of God is destined for success because it worships Christ crucified and risen, the power and wisdom of God.

Rome, Augustine said, is just one of many representatives of the earthly city. Augustine was proud of the cultural achievements of the Roman Empire. He was proud to be a Roman Citizen just as we are proud of the achievements of the United States and are patriotic citizens. But Augustine knew that Rome, like all earthly empires, was destined for failure. Augustine argued that the whole of human history, from the time of Christ till the end of time is concerned with the building and perfecting of the City of God. The earthly city glories in its own power, the City of God glories in the power and wisdom of God.

In the introduction of the Ten Commandments the Lord speaks. “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.” The first of the Ten Commandments commands us to keep things in proper perspective. We can be proud of the cultural, military, scientific, social achievements of the USA but America is not ultimate. The United States is a representative of the "earthly city" whose glory is fading. Christians are citizens of two cities - the earthly city and the City of God. As citizens of the United States we take pride in our cultural achievements and are ashamed of our nation’s sins and faults. We stand when the national anthem is played and salute the flag and many of us will serve in the military and fight our nations battles – but we know the nation and flag are not on the divine side of human reality nor will military power every bring in the kingdom of God. That’s why I resist placing the American flag in the chancel area where the pulpit, communion table and baptismal font point to Christ and the City of God. At our home we fly the American flag every day. We are proud American citizens. One of my sons teaches American history and has been politically involved. My other two sons will soon be serving in the United States Air Force and in the Army. I’m proud of them. But I know that our nation -- as great as it is -- is not absolute. We can’t properly love our nation unless we love God more than our nation.

I hope and pray our nation's campaign will come to a quick and successful conclusion: that Iraq's weapons of mass destruction are destroyed and Saddam Hussein's regime exchanged for a democratic Iraq. But my greater hope is for the City of God whose builder and maker is God.

Let us pray: So be it, LORD; Thy Throne shall never,
Like earth's proud empires, pass away;
Thy Kingdom stands, and grows for ever,
Till all Thy creatures own Thy sway. Amen.