

Like Admah and Zeboiim

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the ninth Sunday after Pentecost, August 6, 1995.
Scripture Lessons: Hosea 11:1-11; Psalm 107:1-9, 43; Colossians 3:1-11; Luke 12:13-21.

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

The total and sudden destruction of two cities, Admah and Zeboiim, have been remembered for nearly four thousand years. Nearly four thousand years ago - two thousand years before the birth of Jesus, well over a thousand years before Hosea the prophet lived - two cities located on the shore of the Dead Sea were suddenly and devastatingly destroyed by fire from the skies. ~~THEY LIVED~~ So devastating was the destruction of Admah and Zeboiim that their memory has lasted nearly four thousand years.

On the eve of Israel's destruction by the armies of Assyria in 722 BC, the Lord remembers Admah and Zeboiim. The Lord says to his people, "You're no better than Admah and Zeboiim. You've turned to other gods. You've broken my commandments. You don't even know who I am. But how can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim." *How CAN I LET WHAT HAPPENED TO THEM LONG AGO HAPPEN TO YOU.*

When I think of Admah and Zeboiim, I think also of Hiroshima and Nagasaki - two cities whose memory I pray will never be forgotten. At about seven o'clock in the morning of Sunday, August 6, 1945, the Japanese radar system reported the approach of three enemy planes. Hiroshima and the surrounding towns were alerted. The alert was removed on the assumption that the planes were simply gathering information about the weather.

At 8:15 in the morning, Miss Toshiko Sasaki, a young factory worker in Hiroshimi, was turning her head to speak to the girl next to her. Dr. Fujii, in a different part of the city, was

reading the newspaper on the porch of his hospital. Mrs. Nakamura, a widow, stood looking out the window of her kitchen. Father Kleinsorge, a Roman Catholic missionary priest, was lying down in his underwear on a cot in the mission house, reading a magazine. Dr. Sasaki, at the Red Cross hospital, was walking down the hallway of the hospital with a blood specimen. Reverend Tanimoto, pastor of the Hiroshima Methodist Church, was thinking about the accusations brought against him by a rich industrialist that he was an American sympathizer because he was a Christian. This deeply hurt the minister. He was a Christian but he also loved his country.

All of a sudden, a flash of searing light about a thousand feet over Hiroshima - then heat - hotter than the sun - followed by tremendous shock waves - one shock wave after another. Then darkness as a vast mushroom cloud rose nearly ten miles into the sky. Then whirlwinds and fire throughout the city. In a matter of moments 100,000 men, women and children were killed. The lucky ones were immediately incinerated.

I'm reminded of the words of Archibald MacLeish - words that may have been influenced by what happened at Hiroshima.

And there, there overhead, there, there hung over
Those thousands of white faces, those dazed eyes,
There in the starless dark the poise, the hover,
There with vast wings across the cancelled skies,
There in the sudden blackness the black pall
Of nothing, nothing, nothing - nothing at all.

In the coming months another 40,000 men, women and children died of radiation sickness. Radiation sickness went through three stages. The first stage happened almost immediately as the body was bombarded by neutrons, beta particles, and gamma rays.

Many people who appeared to be otherwise unharmed died within hours of the explosion. If you survived the first stage, the second stage set in about two weeks later. It produced AIDS like symptoms. The immune system was destroyed. Thousands of people died of anemia, pneumonia and other parasitic diseases that took advantage of the destruction of the immune system. If you survived the second stage, the third stage lasted sometimes for months. Burns would not heal. Broken bones would not knit. You become prone to leukemia and other forms of cancer.

About nine months after the bomb was dropped, the New Yorker Magazine sent John Hersey to Japan to interview survivors. I have a required reading list for my three boys. One book on that list is John Hersey's, Hiroshima. According to Hersey, many Japanese ^{he talked with} 'incredibly accepted the bombing as the price paid for war. For example, Mrs. Nakamura spoke for many Japanese when she said, "It was war and we had to expect it."

Years later Rev. Tanimoto met Albert Einstein in Princeton, New Jersey. Einstein's theoretical work laid the foundation for the atomic bomb. Einstein ventured to suggest to Rev. Tanimoto that the the bomb should never have been dropped on a city. It should have been dropped on water or on an unpopulated area. Rev. Tanimoto, in the polite manner of so many Japanese, tried to set Einstein at ease by suggesting that surely the Japanese would have dropped the bomb on America if they had been the first to develop it.

But it should come as no surprize to us that most survivors didn't feel that way. Dr. Sasaki said, "I see that they're

holding a trial for war criminals in Tokyo. I think they ought to try the men who decided to use the bomb and they should hang them all."

Miss Sasaki, the factory worker, suffered a compound fracture of her leg. Her leg healed three inches shorter than her other leg. Radiation sickness prevented healing for a year. She was horribly disfigured and crippled for life. Miss Sasaki had been engaged to be married. Her fiance never visited her. She never saw him again. She once bluntly asked Father Kleinsorge, "If your God is so good and kind, how can he let people suffer like this?" She pointed to her shrunken leg, the other patients in her room, and Hiroshima as a whole.

"My child," Father Kleinsorge answered, "man is not now in the condition God intended. He has fallen from grace through sin." He attempted to give a Christian interpretation of what happened to this young woman nurtured in the religion of Shintoism. He continued to visit her. A year after the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima she prepared herself for baptism into the Christian church.

Years later Rev. Tanimoto, the Methodist minister in Hiroshima, met the pilot of the Enola Gay. Both the pilot and Rev. Tanimoto were understandably nervous when they were introduced. Someone asked, "What thoughts first went through your minds at the time the bomb exploded?" Rev. Tanimoto said that he fell to the ground and said to himself, "Oh, God, what has happened?" The pilot said that when he circled the city and looked back at the tremendous mushroom of smoke and fire, he

cried out, "Oh, God, what have we done?" Then the two men shook hands. They expressed ^{mutual} feelings of regret. They felt relieved to be reconciled to one another.

Last week I went to the Library and read the Oxford Tribune on microfilm from August 1945. The August 8 edition reported no news of Hiroshima. It reported that the carnival opened on August 6. Rides were 10 cents. Roy Acuff of the Grand Ole Opry was performing at Sunset Park. It reported that Billy and Vernie Ringler spent the weekend at Hacks Point in Maryland.

^{There was some war news however}
It reported that it was the 192nd week of war against Japan. It reported that the parents of Lawrence Pinno received a letter from their son in the navy. He had left Hawaii and was on his way to the Pacific area - headed towards Japan. The paper reported that Lieutenant Saul Savitch had received a medal in recognition of courageous service in the South Pacific. The paper also reported that private Willard Andy Wilson had been wounded in action in the South Pacific. Everybody knew that a massive invasion of Japan was being prepared and they dreaded it.

News of Hiroshima finally reached Oxford for the August 15th edition of the Oxford Tribune. The Headlines proclaimed, "Victory and Peace". "Japan Accepts Terms of Unconditional Surrender." "Church doors were flung open and a thankful people filed in to give thanks to the Lord."

One editorial expressed these poignant words: "What we feel is told in the embrace a mother gives her returning son, wordlessly, biting her lips to still their trembling; it is the sob rising half stifled in the father's throat ⁺ as he stands

by.... It is above all, an overwhelming sense of grateful sadness, for all the known and unknown dead and wounded out of this great conflict."

The Bible tells us that God is a parent. God has those kinds of feeling also. Those feelings well up in the heart of God when he contemplates the horror of seeing his children suffer the fate of Admah and Zeboiim. ^{HIROSHIMA & Nagasaki} "How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim." The Lord doesn't apologize for Admah and Zeboiim. The Lord doesn't try to justify the destruction of innocent men and women and children. He remembers and he weeps.

Today we remember Hiroshima and Nagasaki. We remember with joy the end of World War 2. And we also "experience an overwhelming sense of grateful sadness, for all the known and unknown dead and wounded out of this great conflict." As we remember I urge you to put aside the fruitless debate between those who feel we should apologize for what happened on August 6, 1945 in Hiroshima and those who try to justify what happened. Instead let us remember what happened and ask, with the Lord, the far more important question, ^{who have been given the name of Christ} "How can we ever let this happen again?"

Let us pray: Mighty God, your power fills heaven and earth, is hidden in atoms and flung from the sun. Control us so that we may never turn natural forces to destruction, or arm nations with cosmic energy; but guide us with wisdom and love, so that we may have power to good purpose, for the building of human community and the betterment of our common lives; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Sources:

Mielke, "Hiroshima: Our Guilt and Our Atonement", in Best Sermons, 1959-1960 Edition.

John Hersey, Hiroshima.