

AFTER THE FLOOD: NEW COVENANT

A Sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the fifth Sunday in Lent, April 6, 2003.

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

Thursday night Kay and I attended the last of four area high school musicals at Avon Grove High School. Many of our young people were involved with the plays. What wonderful talent we have in our young people. I felt so proud. As I watched the plays I saw young people 15 or 16 years old *often* playing the parts of adults. And, for a moment, I saw them not as ~~they are now~~, but as ~~they will be one day~~. So polite. So confident. So well spoken. And they acted so naturally, so seemingly effortlessly. But in order for them to look natural they had to practice for weeks if not months.

I once heard a journalist interviewing a professional actor. What did you have to do in preparation for the play. "I had to gain about 30 pounds to play my part." How do you learn your lines? Do you memorize? "Not exactly. I first read the script. I try to imagine what kind of person I'm portraying. I carry the script everywhere I go. I read it so often that my lines become a part of me. I watch movies of other actors who've played my character. I read books about my character. I try to think the way she thinks and feel the way she feels. And at some point in my preparation *I become* the character." What do you mean, you become the character? "I mean I'm no longer myself, but the character I portray."

That got me thinking about our Old Testament Scripture lesson. God promises a new covenant. He's talking to us, his people, to whom he had given a script, laws written in stone. "Learn my law and obey it like an actor learning his or her part in a play and you'll produce the most wonderful play imaginable." But we didn't take time to learn our parts or obey them. In fact, the stone tablets were broken and we lost the script altogether. So God promised to make a new covenant with us. The new covenant will be written on our hearts, not on tablets of stone.

The difference between the Old Covenant and the New is like the difference between how an actor first is handed a script, with her lines written in black and white on paper. But as she practices, the script becomes a part of her self. It's written in her heart so that she plays the part of her character naturally. We're all actors in the play of life and God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is our audience. Remember the words of Shakespeare in his play, *As You Like It*.

*All the world's a stage
And all the men and women merely players:*

God has given us a script for a Divine Comedy. Every day we rehearse the play he's given for us to act out. Sometimes the devil wants to change the script to turn the Divine Comedy into a tragedy. And sometimes we want to change the script. But as long as we follow the script God gave us we will produce the ^{most} beautiful play imaginable.

The *Sunday worship service* is kind of like play practice or a dress rehearsal. We come here to learn our parts. We repeat our lines over and over with the hope that one-day we'll learn our part. Every week we confess our sins reading the *Prayer of Confession* in our bulletins like an actor learner his or her part. *But every once in a while* something clicks within us and the words leap off the paper and into our hearts. When that happens the law of God is written on our hearts. *Every week we recite the Apostles' Creed*. Some of us read it out of the hymnal like an actor just receiving his lines for a play. We read it because we're not that familiar with the Creed yet. Others *recite* the Creed like professionals without even thinking about it – we've been reciting it for so long. But every once in a while, the words of the Creed leap off the page or off our lips and enter our heart. When that happens the law of God is written on our hearts. When I was a young pastor in Reedsville, Pennsylvania I got a phone call from a woman who attended church the morning before. She said, "Yesterday when I was reciting the Creed something happened. I began to weep. I was so happy. I really believe this. This is really true." What happened to that woman? I believe the Lord wrote his law on her heart.

I think again of a scene in *The Sound of Music* where Maria dances with Captain von Trapp and they suddenly realize they're in love with one another. They dance so well – like ^{people who have danced for years} professionals, so seemingly without effort. But I realize the actors have practiced their dance for weeks and weeks – perhaps sometimes stepping on toes – until something clicked and *they became the dance*. About twenty years ago Kay and I took dancing lessons. We went every week for about 10 weeks and, sometimes, even practiced at home. At first, I had to think so hard about what I was doing – where my feet were suppose to be. Left foot step, right foot step, slide. Kay would say something but I had to concentrate so much on my feet and hands that I didn't hear what she was saying. But there came a time, where something happened, and "I got it." The dance entered my heart

as well as my head and I could dance without thinking. Something like that happens when the Old Covenant written on stone, is written on our heart.

Fred Buechner writes about the Old and New Covenants. The *Old Covenant* means the old agreement that was arrived at between God and Israel at Mount Sinai with Moses where God said, "If you obey me, I'll love you." The *New Covenant* means the new agreement that was arrived at by God *alone* in an upstairs room in Jerusalem with Jesus presiding. Like Moses, Jesus believed that if you obey God, God will love you, *but here he's saying something beyond that*. He's saying if you don't obey God, that doesn't mean that God won't love you. It means simply that *God's love becomes a suffering love*: a love that suffers because it is not reciprocated, a love that suffers because *we who are loved suffer* and suffer precisely *in* our failure to reciprocate. By giving us the cup to drink, Jesus is saying that in loving us *God bleeds for us* – not "even though" we don't give a damn but precisely *because* we don't. God keeps his part of the covenant whether we keep our part or not; it's just that one way costs him more.

In one of the plays I attended there was a moment when one of the actors became briefly confused. He forgot his lines or didn't come in on cue. But what I found so wonderful is that the other actors immediately, sensing his problem, supported him. They care for him. They wanted him to remember who he was. And as the actors briefly ad libed he found himself and the play went on. In the same way, all of us ^{mess up -} forget the ~~lines~~ ^{script} God has given us ~~to say~~ or maybe even don't like the ^{script} ~~lines he's given~~ us – but as members of the body of Christ our fellow actors bring us through.

How does God write his law on our hearts? I don't know how it happens. It's a mystery. Sometimes it happens suddenly as with the Apostle Paul on the Road to Damascus. Many others have a different experience. ^{we began learning to script God has given us} As children, ^{we} we learned the books of the Bible by heart. We memorized John 3.16. We sat in Sunday School and church while our minds were outside playing baseball. We attended confirmation classes at our parents' insistence and made a profession of faith with our lips if not with our hearts. ^{we were learning our part in God's play.} But someday – perhaps years later something happens – maybe something tragic like a death or something joyful like the birth of a baby and, *halleluia*. We use to say, "I must go to church." Now we say, "I was glad when they said unto me, let us go into the house of the Lord."

Tom Long once witnessed a church presentation of Dicken's, *A Christmas Carol*. One of the most beloved men in the congregation was playing, the part of old Scrooge. You know the story. Near the end of the play God writes his law on Scrooge's heart and for the first time in his life Christmas isn't humbug but a great joy. Scrooge flings up the stage window and looks out into the congregation to an imaginary boy. "Hey you. You boy! Come up here, I have something ^{wonderful} for you to do." And to Scrooges great surprise a little boy in the audience thought Scrooge was calling him. He got out of his seat and ran up on the stage. Scrooge, realizing what happen^{ed}, ^{put his arm around him & said} and spontaneously said, "Yes. I'm calling you. I want you, too, to have a part in this play." ~~God is calling each one of us to learn our script and learn it so well that it becomes written on our hearts.~~

Holy God, source of all love, on the night of his betrayal Jesus gave his disciples a new commandment, to love one another as he loved them. Write this commandment in our hearts; give us the will to serve others as he was the servant of all, who gave his life and died for us, yet is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

~~not the way it is when God writes his law on our hearts, we get out of our seats and ~~respond to~~ eagerly take our place in the play -- No more lonely~~

~~As long as the law of God remains written on stone or in letters, we stay in our seats, spectators Christianty, Spectators in~~

That's the way it is when God writes his law on our hearts.

As long as the law of God remains written on stone or in letters, we stay in our seats, spectators rather than actors.

But when God writes his law on our heart, we respond to his command, we get out of our seats, we become actor rather than spectators in God's great dramatic play.