Preached by: Dr. Carl A. Rush
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church
Alexandria, VA 22310
August 1, 2010

Hosea 11:1–11
Colossians 3:1–11

APPROPRIATE ATTIRE

"Startle us, God. O God, startle us with the wild improbability of what we say we believe. Startle us with the incredible beauty of goodness this place and our being here represents. We pray in the name of Christ."

The words I've just shared in prayer are the words John Buchanan offers at Fourth Presbyterian in Chicago. He said every time the lights dim and the music grows soft those words come to his mind—prayer for the body of Christ. A prayer that, if we paraphrased it, might sound like this: "God, convince me again that when I surrender to you my life changes in ways that I have not imagined. The enormity of your love and forgiveness are so radically different than I can conceive, it is startling."

Now this sort of experience—the complete affirmation and acceptance that we receive from God—is an experience that is no doubt hard to maintain. And yet it is there in all its simplicity. Startle us, O God. Startle us with the wild improbability of what we say we believe. Startle us with the incredible beauty of goodness, the affirmations of this place, and our being here this morning.

Before Buchanan penned that prayer, there was another pioneer, if you will, who understood the depth of spirituality which comes from absolute surrender—absolute dependence upon God. You may have been unaware that Evelyn Underwood had penned some of the words that you have probably read in devotions. She says being a disciple of Jesus is not "do this." And that's often what the church teaches, isn't it? *Do this, don't do that.* She says the essence of being a Christian is, "This happened." That's what Colossians, the third chapter, is saying to us, and it's saying the same thing to that group of believers who first read it hundreds and thousands of years ago. This happened; and because this happened, you are a people who have been completely transformed—remade. Remember your baptisms. We heard it this morning when we remembered our baptism: "Child of the covenant, in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Sprit."

This baptism happens, this sacrament of communion happens, despite us. Jesus was born of Mary, a virgin. He was fully God and fully human. Now, without having to dissect all the nuances of what that can or cannot mean, I think I've just spoken the words that help us as we try to communicate to our children, and to one another, who God is. God is fully revealed in the person we know as Jesus, the Messiah, the Christ. And Jesus is who he says he is. How improbable is this truth—this certainty? That God would, indeed, step down to become a lowly human. No wonder the world (we) have such a hard

time believing what we say we believe: a child someone would say born in innocence. But, if you've ever had an infant, you know that they come with just a tinge less than innocence: they want what they want when they want it, and if you don't give it to them, they will let you know.

But, certainly born in vulnerability—and this birth led eventually to Jesus who is indeed fully God and fully human. This birth led to a murder: the crucifixion. And that death overwhelmed forever our destructive self-love. Did you catch the way Book of Colossians listed the vices and the virtues—two sets of vices? We didn't read the next set of virtues, but there's a second set of those also (12 through 14), as if to say, "All of this stuff is idolatry—is misdirected self-love."

And this love we have, this insatiable love we have for our well-being—Jesus has mastered us. And Paul says has given us a re-birth, if you will—a resurrection birth. A life we would not choose on our own. A life that is qualitatively different from the old life. It's like having two sets of clothes.

I've taken to bringing an extra set of clothes with me in my truck because there's been some discussion about going to the garden in my clergy attire and sometimes bringing that home with more than vegetables. In fact one night the question was, "Did you lay down in this in the garden?" But now that the stains have all been removed, I just take an extra set of clothes that can be filthy when I get home, and it is okay. That's what the Book of Colossians is describing. It's like going from wanting to be rich and envied and admired more than anything else and beginning to long for the love of others, not the adulation.

Our lives make room for new beings, and it literally is like taking off filth-infested clothes and being spiritually refreshed and renewed, washed in such a way that it's appropriate to put on obedience to Christ. But how do you get to that point? If we've never felt it, it sounds other-worldly. It sounds really impossible. And if we have felt it, we're sorry that that longing waxes and wanes and we wonder how we can ever feel it again. The gospel of Jesus Christ happened. And it happens in us each time we are willing to go beyond that idolatry described in Colossians. It's interesting. None of us here would say that immorality is excusable, but Paul lifts the sin of greed right up there with sexual misconduct. Wow!

We try to make our disobedience simple, don't we? As if carrying a quarter and a dime and a penny's worth of sin is much less offensive that carrying around 46 pennies. Are we willing this morning, in this sacrament, to be remade: to long again to love one another, to seek the freedom that acceptance and affirmation bring when we share it in the same abundance we have received it? Are we willing this morning, to use the words of evangelicals, to be washed clean and experience that love for a new life? And when the longing wanes, as it inevitably will, are we willing to long for the longing again?

It really is amazing how different life can be when we trust that what we *say* happened really *does,* even today, even for us. Amen.