

Preached by Carl Rush
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church
Alexandria, VA
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Isaiah 60: 1-6
Ephesians 1: 3-14
John 1: 10-18

BECOMING PRAISE

The following comes from Chapter 18 of *Huckleberry Finn*. I think it was on a Sunday, like this Sunday, when passages like the ones we've just read were read at church, and here is what Huck said:

Next Sunday we all went to church, about three mile, everybody a-horseback. The men took their guns along, so did Buck, and kept them between their knees or stood them handy against the wall. The Shepherdsons done the same. It was pretty ornery preaching - all about brotherly love, and such-like tiresomesness; but everybody said it was a good sermon. And they all talked it over going home, and had such a powerful lot to say about faith and good works and free grace and preforeordination, and I don't know what all, that it did seem to me to be one of the roughest Sundays I had run across yet.

Now, if you're the kind of person that when I was reading the Ephesians passage, you just had your soul welling up within you with response, you need to be coming and helping me on Sunday from this pulpit. If there was ever a Presbyterian edition of the gospel of grace, it's that first part of Ephesians.

Yes, it says wonderful, marvelous things. But it begins a sentence and puts in all kinds of qualifiers before you ever get to the whole point of the sentence at the end. And by that time, if you are like me, sometimes you've forgotten where you started.

And then John begins to talk about the word. Now he talks about the word earlier – the logos of God – and he talks about being destined to receive the wisdom of God and that all this is the means of human salvation.

Before my son went back to school yesterday, we had one of those seven or eight minute theological encounters that have become so precious to both of us. It reminded me of something I had forgotten—that Carl Barth described salvation as a person drowning in the middle of a lake. A helicopter comes and from that helicopter leaps Jesus Christ down to be the life guard. Christ pulls that person to the shore without one bit of effort on the part of the drowning swimmer.

Now if you really believe that, it has huge implications for how you live your life—how gratitude and not guilt guides your understanding of God coming to you. And then along comes John. John seems to be one of my son's favorite gospels. No wonder. Verse 10: He was in the world and the world came into being through him. He came to what was his own and they did not accept him. He gave to all who would believe the power to believe a summary of the first part of what we've read leading to an introduction to what will transpire throughout the gospel of John. Words of reassurance like, "You did not choose me; I chose you. Go and bear fruit."

The gospel of John beginning with those wonderful words, “Then the light came into the darkness and darkness did not overcome it,” and now the word—the logos of God—isn’t located just with God anymore, it’s with us. And then, as if to dramatize the whole nature of the word coming in the flesh, Jesus establishes his residence. Literally, he pitches his tent or joins us in our tabernacle. So often people who are hungry do not see the need to include those who come in their midst.

Do we really believe that our faith is little more than one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread? Do we believe that when we gather in the sanctuary that we are all beggars, and there are some who have come looking for the reassurance that we do in fact know that the bread of heaven is our savior?

“The light came to his own, but they did not accept it.” If you look at verse 14, the logos, the word, the wisdom, the one and only Jesus, the one who created the cosmos then enters that which he has created and is now in our midst also, the word of God became flesh. No more powerful words have ever been written. This “enfleshment” is indeed glorious. And we bask in the days of Christmas because this enfleshment is the flesh of the only begotten son of God.

Now God will make us God’s children. We will be joint heirs with Christ, we read throughout the New Testament. But only Christ has the unique status and only John describes it as such—the pre-eminent status of being begotten of the father.

Later the Nicene Creed will say those words. Phrases that we can remember: begotten, not made, God of God, fully God and fully human, full of grace and truth, with God from the very beginning; that very first act of breathing life into creation. Of separating light from darkness, of overcoming the power of chaos, in the water, he was there from that moment and before.

John is pointing us to the fullness of grace and truth. John is asking us, “Who is Jesus?” Is he the one that was held in the bosom of God and now directs us to understand anew what it means to look upon him to see the images in our story?

We can’t be Christians without the deity of Christ. Jesus really is who he said he is. And this matters more than anything else. But our children are not growing up in a world that believes that Jesus is who he said he was. Our children are more likely to hear Jesus described as a great philosopher, not the divine. Our culture will gladly proclaim that Jesus is the greatest role model for all of life, but that same culture will reject his claim to be the way, the truth, and the only light.

We must see the radical nature in which what we say in this room is watered down when we go out into the world. Are we children of the most high God? And if we are—if we are to be God’s children—more childlike and not just people who wear a label of being a Christian, what will we have to do? There will be some who will tell us there will be some who will retreat. That we should go back from the world and isolate ourselves in every way we can.

But the gospel tells us to live by grace and to be obedient. We must live for people in that obedience and not be tricked into living for some law. We can never choose the law over grace. God has not chosen the law over grace with us. And yet we must be obedient to that law through grace.

Am I beginning to sound a little bit like Ephesians? It's really very simple, isn't it? We must seek His logos truth with respect; with love for one another and with healing actions.

Philip Yancey says very clearly, I think, that no one has ever become a disciple of Jesus because they lost an argument about who he really is. We will not argue one another into faith. And our evangelism will not be one where we defend what we believe the right rules are with any degree of success.

Jesus—whose name literally means God is salvation. Think about this—think about the implication for Presbyterians. God is salvation, *not* God teaches salvation. We like to teach it. But sometimes we struggle with being God's salvation for one another. At best, sometimes we claim to offer salvation. God offers salvation to the praise and his glory, thank goodness, God does more than offer. He jumps from that helicopter into our pond and drags us to the shore kicking and screaming—not cooperating, not helping.

The next time you go for a run or a bike ride or a hike, I want you to stop and think about how you are approaching what you are about to do. Because I think it has a great deal to do with how we approach salvation—God's salvation enfleshed—children of the word, of the light of the most high God. For some people a hike or a walk or a run or a bike ride is all about deliberate speed, about beginning and finishing the task. And if there is someone alongside, whose pace or gait is slower than their own, all the joy is sucked from the experience and they grow increasingly impatient.

There are others who begin any activity and believe and soar and savor the flavor of what they are doing. They are doing more than conquering a mountain or a trail. They are doing more than strolling on the beach. They are enjoying the company of others who are also following the light. And when someone stumbles, it's not an interruption, it's a privilege to offer a hand up—a hand that we receive from the only begotten of God who invites us to take in all the sights and the wonders, all the sounds of this journey.

I love the way St. Catherine put it. "All the way to heaven IS heaven. All the way to heaven is heaven because He said, 'I am the way.'"

I pray this has been transformed from one of the roughest Sundays into one where you have a light for your path and you have heard and felt God claim you as his own—again.

So may it be. Amen.