

Preached by Dr. Carl A. Rush
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church
Alexandria, VA 22310
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Exodus 24:12–18
Matthew 17:1–9

GOD MAKES SURE

I have probably preached on the transfiguration more than I have on any other passage in scripture over my career as a minister of the word and sacrament—more than I've preached on Easter, more than I've preached on Christmas. I've preached on this passage more Sundays because I started out as associate pastor and every year when transfiguration Sunday came around if there was an option, whoever was the pastor of that church always called on an associate to preach for Transfiguration Sunday. It wasn't punishment. It just was an indication that most pastors don't have any idea what is happening in this passage.

There are times when I really miss King James. Remember when we read this passage in the King James Bible and it said his clothes became white as they'd been bleached by Fuller bleach. That was a long time ago, in another era, to think about Fuller bleach bringing out the brilliance of Christ at the transfiguration.

Think about how this passage comes around every year at the end of the season of revealing, of epiphany and at the beginning, right before the beginning of Lent—Transfiguration Sunday has to have meaning for us, but what is it, really?

I fear that just like Peter we still don't understand what's taking place. After all that God has done, after all that Christ did in person with his disciples, they are still clueless as to who he is. And so, just as God has revealed who Christ is, illumined our minds and shown us the purpose of his coming as a babe in Bethlehem, we'll see the new meaning of transfiguration today. You will see in future bulletins the explanation of why we have worship candles—why we are as careful to remove the flame as we are to bring it in when we light the candles, why the acolytes take that lighting device and set it aflame again to go out into the world.

We are called to be his light to the world and candles at least remind us every week that our light really does come from him. Did you hear it in the prayer of confession that we are called out of our darkness, out of our shadows, out of our sin, into his righteous. Not our own righteousness, but one we have received from Jesus.

I know I've already referred to Kenda Dean and her book entitled, *Almost Christian*. But I can't help but return to her words. She is a Princeton professor of youth ministry and she has received a lot of press about her book. Every time I write about it Jen James has to correct me and say the title of the book isn't "Un-Christian," it's "Almost Christian." But the message she shares with us about the faith we have given our children is un-Christian. She warns us that this faith has become so benign as to be less than the

gospel. Being almost Christian is sort of like being almost honest, isn't it? It just doesn't add up ... or almost pregnant. You are or you aren't. There is no *almost*.

We talk about the meaning of this book because, for one, our youth leaders have studied it. We all want to be on the same page. But we've also talked about the meaning of this book because it is, in fact, what we have communicated not only to our children, but I fear to the whole world ... that the gospel for us has basically three meanings, three points: (1) be nice to others; (2) feel good about yourself; and (3) know that if you get in trouble, you can always turn to God, if there's an emergency. As I said, *un-Christian*. Not what we believe, but what we have in fact probably taught our children all too well.

If someone were to ask you, "In a nutshell, what does Christianity mean?" Would you be stumped? Would you know how to respond? A short answer. Does our faith reflect what we believe? Do we dare say that Jesus is who he says he is? Or, do we repackage the gospel and the message of Christ. When he says "the wages of sin," or "death," do we say those kinds of things to our children anymore? Or have we made it all much more like Pablum—something easier to consume?

Transfiguration Sunday reminds us that we are about to enter the Lenten season and just like Peter and James and John, we regularly fail to listen to God's promise. At least they didn't understand; and if the rest of the New Testament is a proof of anything, it's that they had to keep learning the lesson over and over again after they became the church. When Jesus said he was going to Jerusalem to die, they rejected that message. In fact, in Caesarea right before they come to this mountain, Peter said, "Say it isn't so. Don't say it any more, Jesus, that you're going to Jerusalem and die." And how does Christ respond? "Peter, if that's what you want to believe, if that's who you are, get behind me, because you're just like Satan, too."

If you look at your TEMPO when it comes in April, our music director Melvin is writing about something akin to what Jesus says in Caesarea ... about how in his going to Jerusalem, he might die and suffer on a cross. Melvin reminds us that Easter and resurrection mean so much more when we dare to pass through those shadows of Christ's death on a cross. If resurrection can be more poignant, it is when we take Christ's suffering seriously, when we believe that he not only dies to be Savior of the world, but he died for us—for me—for you.

If we could say that with conviction—that he died for me—that would be summation enough. It would change everything that we say to our children. If we could take that watered-down faith and say the meaning of Christianity is that Christ died for our sins and for the sin of the world it would give our faith new life.

As I've said, I've preached on this passage probably more than any other in the Bible. That's kind of striking for me. I should know it inside and out, and still I'm surprised by it. By the way I have to keep relearning and responding to the life-changing faith that God makes possible. Not only does he misspeak in Caesarea-Phillippi, but Peter misspeaks here too, doesn't he? His first response to Jesus and Moses and Elijah—a real three-

some, that's big stuff—his first response is to say, "Let's do something; let's do anything." He wants to do what he knows how to do well. He wants to prepare to celebrate a Festival of Booths. If you've ever heard a sermon from a Presbyterian pulpit on the transfiguration, you've heard about the Festival of Booths, because that's what we teach. It comes right before Passover. It's why Peter makes the suggestion he does. He's not really all that misguided. Nonsense.

How do I know that's not the meaning of this passage? Look at the way it reads. And Sean did a great job reading the scripture when he got to the part where it says, "And suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them." And while he was still speaking—meaning Peter—a voice said ...

If a voice started to speak from the cloud while he was still speaking, that means he got interrupted, right? He was stopped cold in his tracks, in my thought, for a reason. This voice from heaven cuts him off because God wants to make sure that we understand who Jesus is. God's voice interrupts in order to pronounce, "Jesus is, indeed, my beloved. My son."

The beauty of the passage is in the simplicity. Listen to him. Listen to him as if they haven't heard a word he said up until now. Or at least they haven't understood. And we, like Peter, have been thinking we need to fix the church, or like he thought in Caesarea, we need to fix someone. Peter wanted to fix Jesus so that he would stop talking this craziness about dying.

When we want to fix God's kingdom, I think God makes sure that we listen. So the next time you hear somebody who knows just exactly what will fix Bush Hill Presbyterian, or fix your faith, and they call on you to do something that will help them fix what's wrong, either here or somewhere else, ask yourself, is this more demanding or less demanding of me as a Christian? Is this watering down the truth that we have all fallen short, that we all stand guilty except for the work of Jesus Christ? Ask yourself if you do what is being suggested will you be listening to God's beloved? Everything we need to know about faith and life was spoken by Jesus, no matter what anyone tells you. Listen to my beloved. That's what it means to be a disciple.

Amen.