

Preached by Dr. Carl Rush  
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church  
Alexandria, VA  
December 7, 2008

Isaiah 40: 1-11  
Mark 1: 1-8

## **A GOSPEL ONLY GOD CAN OFFER**

I'm old enough that I can still remember when they came out with today's English version—how they put that translation of the Bible as a sub-text. Instead of saying *Holy Bible* like all the Bibles I'd ever seen, on the spine on the outside, (there it was - a different name) it was called *The Good News Bible*. It was forever etched in my mind, the first time I saw the title. I was shocked. But then, that's the way we think of the Good News of the Gospel. We think of it as our written proclamation about Jesus.

Mark uses the term "good news" in a different way. He says the good news is the oral preaching that Jesus is our source of salvation. It may seem like a slight distinction, but if you remember as God spoke in Genesis, the world was created from his breath. Mark is recapturing that as Jesus speaks; who he is, our salvation, is recreated for us.

Mark's gospel is also good news because those who herald—those who share with others the reality that Jesus is the source of our salvation—those who do this find that they are in the same position as John the Baptist. They always have to point beyond themselves. Those who herald the good news are brave enough to admit that they are nothing without Christ; they know that all throughout the Bible, God is asking for their very best efforts. But God is also releasing us from being obsessed with our own activities.

John the Baptist experienced that kind of freedom. I think it's in the eighth chapter when Mark lets us know without a doubt that God wants our best efforts. But our best effort always has to be Christ-centered.

I watched as people descended upon this church campus yesterday—the most unlikely people shouldering big blowers to gather the leaves—people with important tasks all week long gathering to do the most mundane of acts of love for this community. When I went downstairs and over 60 children came to see Santa, even though he was a little frightening even for me, we began with a prayer. Yes, even sitting on Santa's knee can be Christ-centered.

So all of our mission projects, our youth programs, our fellowship events, our music programs, our evangelism efforts, our holiday parties, our Bible studies and small group meetings—all are part of the good news of Jesus' coming that only a sovereign God could offer.

How do we keep all these activities which require so much planning and organization, so much fore-thought, Christ-centered?

Now I'm not much for quoting poems in sermons, but Robert Fulghum is my kind of prose writer. He wrote one book entitled, *It Was On Fire When I Laid Down On It*. And he also wrote *Uh-oh, Here Comes Christmas*. His words inspire me. Here's what he says:

"I usually draw up a heavy things-to-do list about this time of year. I'm a black belt at making lists. I even have lists of lists. Seven pages of expectations that are in and of themselves enough to permanently destroy Christmas. But this year I started from somewhere else in my mind. New lists. One page. A things-to-be list. Concentrating on the things I wanted to have; the condition of my mind and spirit. I yearned for the quality of life I wanted to manifest. The vibration I wanted to give to other people. A things-to-be list for Christmas. Then I boiled the list down to one line. And finally, one word. Then I wrote that word on a tiny piece of paper. Then I wrapped that tiny piece of paper around a small candy cane and ate it - list and all."

Shazam! Hark the Herald Angels Sing! Oh sure, it sounds a little crazy, but since when is Christmas supposed to make sense? Oh, sure. It's a little early. Today is December 7<sup>th</sup>, but since when is Christmas a matter of time? I mean, who makes the rules? Who sets the regulations about Christmas, anyway? Who says it must be orderly and organized—a full blown affair? Who's in charge of Christmas? Me. That's who. The Christmas list-eater.

Now I suppose you want to know that one word. Nope. You've got to work it out for yourself—just like Christmas. Because if it ain't inside you somewhere, all the lists in the world won't make it happen.

Have a candy cane on me.

Our unifying mission is preparing a path for the gospel to enter our lives and then always pointing people beyond us to Jesus. This good news can only be accomplished—can only be conceived—by a loving God who also provides us the opportunity, the only opportunity we have to make a real contribution with our lives. And that is to receive and share the Good News that Jesus is the source of our salvation.

Amen.