

Preached by Dr. Carl Rush
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church
Alexandria, VA
November 25, 2007
Christ the King Sunday

Jeremiah 23:1-6
Luke 1:68-79

NOTHING TO PROVE – EVERYTHING TO GAIN

We read a very famous piece of scripture. It's known as the *benedictus*, the Latin word for the first word in the reading. We throw the word "blessing" around a lot like we all know what it means. But I wonder, if we had to come up with a definition, what would we tell our children what the word blessing, or *benedictus*, means? When we put the word "benediction" in the bulletin, it's even more confusing. Notice, I don't use that word. Have you ever wondered why it says "charge and blessing" at the end rather than benediction? If I say benediction, or if we print it, the response I get will be bowed heads in prayer. A blessing doesn't always have to be a prayer; certainly it needs to have the reverence of a prayer. Imagine that, if we lived our lives to be a blessing as if we were praying. If your children ask, blessing literally means sharing joy with one another. It's an act of worship, but worship is supposed to be rehearsal for all of life. So we are to replicate our actions in worship throughout the week. Spiritual memory, if you will.

Zachariah, the father of John the Baptist had a vision so powerful he is unable to speak until the child is born. He knows that God will send a Shepherd King, and Zachariah is happy for his people. Later, others will recognize Jesus as the king of salvation for them, their Lord and their God. But their struggle will be there because when they recognize Jesus as their salvation, as God's answer to all of their hardship both physical and spiritual, they have already made up their mind what kind of salvation they would like. They've made up their mind in advance: what they'd like Jesus to do, how they'd like for him to look, and where they'd like for him to go. In so doing, they would make a savior over in their own image.

We run that ultimate risk of missing who Jesus is as King of kings and Lord of lords and who we are called to be as subjects, even servants, within God's court. I think it was Andrew Greeley who first came up with the phrase "we like to domesticate Jesus." What that means is we like to demonstrate our faith by rendering Jesus into a savior who only comforts us; thereby remaking Jesus into someone who we can understand. Do you get that whole God/fully human thing? It just is beyond me; I can't grasp it. It's more than I can understand. In fact, we're more adept at converting Jesus into our purposes than at being converted by Jesus into the New Testament image of what it means to be obedient. Here's the most wonderful thing about our King Jesus: he came and had nothing to prove and everything to gain—the entire world.

We do lots of different things today to prove who Jesus is in our own minds. Even though Jesus is quite content just being who he said he is. One of the most famous attempts is something called the "Jesus Seminar." These people like to portray Jesus as a sage, a peasant wise man, the ultimate guru. Nothing offensive about that, is there?—a really smart teacher; and we like really smart teachers.

Before I came, there was a wonderful series here about *The Davinci Code*, and that was about Jesus, too. We love numbers because we get them; incarnation we don't get. It was a great bit of fiction. It made us fantasize about Jesus being married and having a family, fathering a grand fertility cult. Wasn't it fun? Pure nonsense ... but fun. In fact, 2008 will be about nothing but the remaking of Jesus in our own image, when we turn on our televisions. There will be one claim after another that God is on our side this election year. Political candidates will say it in code, but we know what they mean. They will say, "God bless America." If you don't think that means, "I'm right, and they're wrong," you're kidding yourself. I don't think it means, "God be in our midst; make us a blessing for others." Do you think that's what the political candidates mean when they say, "God bless America?"

Then along comes Luke, and he is cast with a problem because God has promised to be faithful to Israel. Luke has to take this person of Jesus, who was anything but who they wanted him to be, and convey that in fact, Jesus is God being faithful to us—the one, who in our midst, in our hearts, still has nothing to prove and everything to gain. I think it's really easy to be caught of guard by this Jesus, the one the New Testament gives us, not the one from the Jesus Seminar. He is Lord of our salvation, but if you read the New Testament, he is also an enigma. Think about it—all powerful, but crucified? The Jesus of the New Testament is elusive. He's in our hearts, but I'm supposed to see him in you also? Wow. He's the ultimate paradox, as I said, the thing I don't get—fully God and fully human. I love it; it makes me whole. I just can't comprehend what it must mean completely. These are the things that overcame Zachariah, and that overcame the crowds that welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem one day and prompted them to crucify him the next. The same way we crucify Christ when we say not the New Testament Jesus; but the Jesus I like, that's who I'll worship.

Yes, Jesus is God's fulfillment to Israel and to us, but he does it in very unexpected ways and this is what bothered everyone. Jesus included the Gentiles. Think about what it would mean for you to include a Gentile—who you have rejected because they don't fulfill your rules? Jesus includes the type of people that we have already dismissed; because after all, God doesn't love them as much as God loves us—they're not as right as we are.

Jesus includes the unclean. Who do you consider to be unclean? There are people in our society today that when we see them, we immediately think: ugh, not someone I want to be around. Jesus included the poor, the second-class citizens, the women, the Samaritans, the rich tax collectors, and the outcasts. Who are our outcasts in our culture today? I dare say that if you drive five miles in any direction from this church, you will be able to see the outcasts of the American culture, of the American church. It's anyone with an emotional disorder who no longer has a safe place to be. Anyone who doesn't fit our definition of normalcy; or worse, anyone who doesn't fit our definition of beauty. There are outcasts today—they are those who are discriminated against and marginalized.

But there's also good news. The good news is that Jesus also includes the elect, the chosen, the faithful, the Presbyterians—at least those who repent of their initial rejection

of who Jesus really is. Jesus includes you and me when we repent of making him over in our own image.

Maybe you're sitting there thinking, this doesn't apply to me; I don't do that. Maybe you're thinking that this isn't your struggle or problem. Play along with me. We make Jesus over with our little jingles. Jesus is like Bayer Aspirin—he works miracles. Jesus is like Ford—he's got a better idea. Jesus is like Coke—he's the real thing. Jesus is like Hallmark—he cares enough to send the very best. Jesus is like Delta—he's ready when you are. Jesus is like Allstate—you're safe in God's hands. Jesus is like VO5 Hairspray (remember that one?)—he holds through all kinds of weather. Whatever theme we choose, Jesus tastes right and is less filling. My personal favorite, Jesus is like Dial Soap—aren't you glad you have him and don't you wish everybody did?

Why would I trivialize the Gospel of Christ and the person of our Savior? To illustrate how easy it is for us to make Jesus congruent with our lifestyles, with our themes for living. Jesus is anything but congruent with what I would choose on my own. God's blessing is an ultimate blessing. When we say, Christ is King, we can never live the same way again. It's Christ's Kingdom, and our obedience is to him, without question, to the one that is sovereign and Lord of all. As we enter Advent, would that we could believe that we no longer have to be afraid to give Jesus everything since it's already his to begin with.

You see, he came with nothing to prove and everything to gain. Amen.