

Preached by Syl Lorenzo Shannon  
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church  
*Anniversary of Ordination of Syl Lorenzo Shannon as  
Minister of Word and Sacrament – April 28, 1966 to April 28, 2011*  
May 15, 2011 – Fourth Sunday of Easter

Genesis 19:26  
Luke 9:57–62

*Remarks by Syl Shannon:*

On this fourth Sunday of Easter I accept with keen appreciation the opportunity to stand at this sacred desk where my wife and daughter have heard the Proclaimed Word since 1977.

Presbyterian ministers do not belong to a congregation. They belong to the Presbytery.

They send us out like missionaries and call us back when they wish. And today I decided that I should invite 45 people to come and worship with you to represent 45 years of service to God and country. So I cannot ask each of them to stand. The pastor will do that later. But I have to give a shout-out to my granddaughter Erica Nicole Shannon who graduated from Lincoln University last May and has a good paying job with Price Waterhouse Cooper. As the service goes on and during the reception you'll get to speak to some of these distinguished visitors.

During 45 years of service to God and country I've been privileged to serve in nine Presbyteries. For those of other faiths that is like associations or conferences. I've paid close attention to the fact that St. John's Presbyterian Church in Detroit, Michigan, is about 50–50 between black, white and Hispanics. I was privileged to serve in United Presbyterian Church in Plainfield, New Jersey, which had maybe 2/3 white and 1/3 black. And I know that St. Paul Church in Los Angeles, California, is a church that's really, really inclusive. One final church in our faith group is First Church, Wilmington, Delaware. So I want to thank those people who traveled many miles to be here today and those who came from close and near, because you're helping Bush Hill look like those three or four churches I named.

I wish these visitors could be here more often. For me it's just a blessing to hear Pastor Carl pray for our enemies. For me, it's just a blessing to sit where Doris is sitting and to look at the Easter cross. So today if I fail to preach, I want to make this witness of a soldier in the army of the Lord, and I am so glad I'm here. And I'm so glad you are here. For a long time, I was pestering the pastor to get the president of the seminary to preach or to get the executive of the Presbyter of the Presbytery of National Capital. But he gave me the chance to put the bulletin together. And so today you're singing all my songs—the ones I love, the ones that have nurtured me and brought me thus far on the way.

One last aside: I went to seminary not committed to ministry, but rather because the Rockefeller Brothers gave me a brief scholarship. But the first year of seminary John F. Kennedy was assassinated. During that time I had a change of heart, and I hope that some child here will pick up from the vibrations of this day how important it is to celebrate their movement through life—the journey.

## VOWS

Before I begin the sermon I have to give a shout-out to Jim Bolton. He and I played tennis every Monday and Wednesday with the former Pastor Stu Dickson. And these memories are flooding in on me. How we used to get up early before 6:00—we can't do it now, but we can remember. And I want to acknowledge the clergy who've taken off from their places of work to be here. I count it all joy that you would do this for a friend. And I especially acknowledge Kwame Osie Reed because he's the association minister for this part of America for the United Church of Christ, and we thank you for being here. I wish I had time to speak of each of these people who have come. They are all unique and special in the sight of God.

When I was selecting the music for this bulletin, I thought back to the number of people I've read the marriage vows to: over 480 couples. I said to myself, "What kind of sermon would you preach if it were to be your last sermon?" It jumped out at me—it would be this sermon about vows.

I truly thank Arthur Lockamy (*guest soloist*) for bringing "I made My Vow to the Lord" to us in a fresh, powerful way. I made a vow to the Lord a long time ago. I should never forget how it unfolded. I was afraid to go to seminary ... and I was afraid not to go. So one day in July of 1963 I jumped up out of my seat (it was the twelfth day of July) and left the advanced course of the infantry class and went over to see the adjutant or the secretary to the general of the infantry school. I told him that I needed to proceed with a transfer from infantry to the chaplaincy. It took three years to make this transition.

There are a few words that will help you understand this journey. If you were in the Ordnance Corps, and you want to get a masters or a doctorate, the government will pay for it. If you want to go to law school, there is a special program at the University of Virginia for military lawyers. But because of the separation of church and state, if you want to be a missionary to the military in any of the four or five branches of our service, you have to go on your own. But because I had 11 years in the infantry, I had the G.I. Bill to pay for books. And quite frankly, I would not only buy my books, but I'd help other students buy books. Because the G.I. Bill back in the 60s would let you buy as many books as you wished. So today's sermon may help both you and me.

I was sitting in a class entitled, "Chemical, Biological and Radiological Warfare," and when I got up and went to see the adjutant, I learned that he was a Presbyterian elder. So he reminded me that the task would be hard. I would need to study both Hebrew and Greek. And I might not make it. He went on with a sales pitch about how short the Army was when one looked for Negro captains and how wonderful my career would be if I would just "hang in there." I do not believe that this Lt. Col., and incidentally, I worked with him later in Europe when he was the chief of staff and I was the division chaplain. But I don't believe this officer had ever read the gospel you heard this morning: the would-be followers of Jesus.

Permit me to just read the last verse again, this time from the Good News Bible. “Anyone who starts plowing and keeps looking back and continues to look back is not fit for the kingdom.” Jesus said, “Anyone who continues to look back is isn’t worth a thing in my kingdom.” On this beautiful fourth Sunday of Easter, I must thank Pastor Carl and the session and Melvin, my favorite musician in all the world, for allowing me to structure this time that we are gathered here around the thoughts that mean the most to me. Many of you know that I’ve been preaching four-letter word sermons for a long time with the view that by Christmas 2011, I would have a book ready with this provocative title in red ink – “Four-Letter Words” – nothing else on the cover.

Whenever a soldier or sailor used a four-letter word in the presence of the chaplain, he would quickly say, “Excuse me, chaplain.” And I would reply immediately, “Oh, don’t mind me, you didn’t call my name.” But this morning I want to take the time to continue the four-letter word tradition. Today I offer these three four-letter words in one sermon: Vows and Lot’s Wife.

All of us know what vows are. A soldier puts his life on the line as he takes a vow to defend the United States against all enemies, both foreign and domestic. A wife declares that she will stand by her man in sickness and in health, and a husband takes the self-same vow to support and stand by his wife in joy and in sorrow until death departs them. This business of taking and keeping vows is a serious business. When you get right down to it, we all took a vow to pay for our homes in 15 or 20 or 30 years under contract. And sometimes the variables of life cause us to break our vows. Yet David, the prophet king of the text selected today, tells us that God keeps God’s promises. For Noah, God put a rainbow in the sky. For Abraham, God had a ram in the bush. I could go on. Many of you know from experience that God never leaves us alone. There’s a song, in fact, which says He promises never to leave you, never to leave me alone. And I hope you are with me when I say I’m glad God keeps God’s promises—God’s vows.

But look at Lot’s wife, who took a vow to stand by her man. This woman is the wife of the one-time mayor of Sodom. She is told along with her husband to get out of Sodom and Gomorrah. One of the angels said, “Run for your life. Don’t even look back. And don’t stop in the valley, run to the hills where you’ll be safe.” (Look at Genesis 19:17.) But Lot’s wife had a fascination with the city. She belonged to an excellent family. She was a part of that little company of pioneers that left Ur of the Shadiz to create a new city in the world’s civilization. She was a member of that family to which the world owed more than any other family that has ever lived. She was a part of a select group that had given the world its greatest prophets and some of its sweetest singers. Lot’s wife was kinfolk with him through whom God was to send to the world the Savior Jesus Christ. Lot’s wife was kin to Abraham.

Yet she would not listen to the warnings of God: “Get out of Sodom.” The scripture tells us that Lot’s wife moved with her husband into Sodom, but worse still, she allowed Sodom to move into her. In spite of the pure religion in which she had been taught, she was brought up under the evil spell of the wretched life of Sodom. Jesus read this story that was at once timeless and timely. And, so, Jesus says to us as all human kind,

“Remember Lot’s wife.” Lot’s wife looked back and was turned into a block of salt. (King James version says a pillar of salt.) Now salt is a four-letter word— a word of our consideration at another time. But you may Google the word. There you will find that salt is a commodity of great worth. What may we learn this day from Lot’s wife? Well, she had a divided heart. This indicates an undecided will. She was in love with Sodom even though her steps were turned away from it, and so today I ask you to make sure you do not take a divided heart into your future.

I counsel you as I heard Astronaut Ronald McNair give in a commencement address. “Be better than your best.” Because more is involved in the life of the school and the community than you could ever imagine. And God is looking for folks just like you to make a vow and a promise to be useful. Say this with me: “Usefulness is the rent we pay for our time here on earth.”

Ask yourself what were the vows you took as an elder or a deacon, as a wife or a husband, as a child at the baptismal font, or as a parent at the baptismal font. Ask yourself whether the vows you took carried great value for you. Remember your baptism. It has been my view for a long time that the church would have more meaning for folks if we celebrated our baptism day like many of us do our birthday.

The Commencement speaker Ronald McNair finished the moving discourse with this pithy statement: “Don’t ride on the tailgate watching where you’ve been; sit up front with the drive and determine where you’re going.” This is a wonderful statement for a commencement address, but it’s also a good statement for those who are taking margin orders to serve the Lord Jesus day after day, week after week, year after year.

Thursday night I was here in this church with a few other people listening to one of the bureaucrats from the General Assembly. He turned out to be a very effective preacher. Those assembled were challenged to re-vision, to re-imagine, to re-map the life of the church. It struck me that we were able to name and distinguish between fear and tentativeness, and that’s probably what’s going on in the world today. We are so afraid that we might reveal what we are that we keep ourselves in front of our computer screens and spend little or no time talking face to face and eyeball to eyeball. That’s the difference between us and those in my grandfather’s days. But I won’t go there.

But the psalmist captures it all. “Even if I go through the deepest darkness, I will not be afraid.” We may say this psalm quickly without even thinking about this fact: I will not be afraid, Lord, for you are with me. If the truth be known, we are afraid of the person from the wrong side of the track. If the truth be known, we cannot acknowledge that Muslims know more about Mary than Christians know about the Islamic prophet Muhammad. Jesus is referred to 25 times in the Holy Koran. And Mary is mentioned more frequently in the Holy Koran than she is in the New Testament.

I left the church Thursday night thinking about how I wish we could cross the barriers or race bigotry and faith bigotry, and economic fear. I remembered a true story from our time at Ft. Carson, Colorado. I was traveling from the University of Colorado at Boulder

back to Colorado Springs. I stopped for lunch in a near empty diner. A young family, Nancy, her husband Tom and their infant son Eric, stopped for lunch too. And you know me, I'm a nosy chaplain, so I got their names. A few minutes after being seated little Eric squealed with glee. He pounded on the high chair. His face was alive with excitement as he wiggled and giggled. Nancy looked around to find the source of Eric's merriment. A man had entered the diner. A tattered rag of a coat and dirty, baggy pants covered his skinny body. His face was tired and worn. The man spoke loudly, "Hi there, baby. Hi there big boy, I see you." Eric was laughing happily. The more he laughed, the louder the man spoke. Now the man was shouting across the room. "Do you know patty-cake? Do you know Peekaboo?" The man was causing a disturbance. I was glad, I must confess, that he wasn't sitting in the booth next to me. But Nancy was embarrassed and didn't want him near her baby. Their meal came, but Eric was still enraptured with the man. He wanted to be picked up by him.

Finally it was time to leave. Tom paid the check while Nancy started to bolt for the door with Eric in her arms. She had squeeze by a woman near the old man's booth. The old man stood up as Eric reached out to him. Eric leaned over so far that he fell out of his mother's arms. The old man caught him and Eric laid his tiny head on the sore ragged shoulder. The man's eyes closed and Nancy noticed tears running down his cheeks. His aged hands full of grim and pain and hurt, evidence of labor, rest gently on the child. And then his eyes opened. Returning Eric to her he said, "Young lady, take good care of this child. God bless you ma'am, God bless you." That was in 1969, and when I think about it, it's every day, everywhere.

So why do I tell this story? I would like to suggest that Eric is the meaning of Easter. Resurrection joy. Eric is God's arms. God's zeal and God's passion for us. We're tattered people with tattered lives. Tattered hurts and fears and tattered relationships. And tattered sins. God is like little Eric who makes no distinction, but would embrace the least likely of us. Often, those we would like to avoid. So Christ came down from the cross for a reason. His arms are outstretched to you and to me and I know that David was correct when he wrote, "My cup runneth over; God fills my cup to the rim. God's goodness and mercy and God's love will be with me all my life." Why then should I be afraid? Why then should you be afraid? Amen. Amen. Amen.