

Preached by Dr. Carl A. Rush
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church
Alexandria, VA 22310
April 3, 2011
Fourth Sunday in Lent

1 Samuel 16:113
Ephesians 5: 8–14

WHAT'S IN IT FOR ME?

Do you remember the words we used to begin this season of Lent? The words we used on that Ash Wednesday evening when we reminded ourselves that God and only God had breathed life into our dusty forms? That night, when we reflected on our complete reliance on God giving us not only breath but meaning in our existence. As people came forward that evening, I couldn't help but wonder what memories were caressing across their minds as we made the form of a cross on their foreheads. What loss had carved its way back into reality in their thoughts? Ashes placed on foreheads as a reminder of some poignant dream—a shadow, a failure, a time of sadness.

We will begin to conclude this season of Lent in another poignant service which speaks of contrasts on Maundy Thursday. Like Ash Wednesday, we will be looking at light and darkness and understanding again how we find ourselves traversing between these two worlds every day and in every relationship. We will focus on the darkness that night as a metaphor for the evil that took hold when Christ was crucified. We'll focus on the darkness to remember again that we participated in his betrayal. We abandoned him. We were there, instruments used to take his life. I think we have become all too comfortable in our dwelling in such a populous area, all too comfortable with shadows that are more darkness than light.

I'm not sure we are even aware how evil and darkness and the power of sin creeps into our everyday existence—how we are bombarded by darkness. Think about it. Most of us live on streets that are lit all through the evening. All we do is walk out our front door and there's a street light. If we wanted to experience darkness, we'd probably have to travel more than an hour outside the city to escape the light pollution. I think we are just as incapable of escaping our sense of evil; just as comfortable with the dichotomy that exists in our lives between gathering here and worshipping God and loving in a community and then going back out to survive in the world.

I remember once trying to explain the essence of the story from the Old Testament about Sodom and her sister city Gomorrah. It was an elementary Sunday school class. The young children were most interested in the detail of that story. Remember how Lot and his family were spared from the destruction that eventually engulfed both cities? But when they were leaving, the symbolism was they were to leave behind the evil that had formerly been a part of their lives. But Lot's wife looked back. She just couldn't bring herself to make a clean break with what was. What was it that held such a tight grip on her? What was the attachment that was so strong? I really wanted this Sunday school class to get how powerful and enticing evil can become. How sin can indeed

take over. And I was building to a crescendo about Lot's wife being turned into a pillar of salt, and one little boy interrupted and said, "The same thing happened to my Mom. We were out shopping one day and she turned into a telephone pole."

Before you smile, even though you don't get it—before you're too quick to say you understand, let's be honest: We also missed the point of Lot's wife and her attachment to her past. We miss it as much as that little boy completely misunderstood. We misunderstand Ephesians, Chapter 5 as well. For we accept inordinate pride in our lives. We accept the idolatry of self as normal. And whatever we call darkness probably belongs in someone else's life—someone who needs more forgiveness, mistakenly we think, than we do.

Our instincts are hard-wired into our hearts, if we are honest, that are predisposed to sin. I see it just as clearly as you do. I even experience it as you do—the effects of not choosing life. You know ... when someone writes you off, even someone in the church, and stops speaking to you suddenly, You just sense the darkness—the evil—coming in, lurking all around. For when anger and disdain lie just beneath the words in a conversation, is it because we are more comfortable with our former lives, or is it because we are unwilling to admit that we have become complacent? It's not enough, Ephesians says, to passively resist evil. We are called to be light. We are called to overcome the works of darkness.

Many of you have had time to read the front page story about one of our sister churches in this Presbytery. The words that grip me so tightly were the description of calculated and evil deception made worse by complacency. After receiving an e-mail warning churches of this story, after it was printed, we received another e-mail with some corrections that I would like you to take with you today. One thing that Wilson Gunn, General Presbyter, wanted to make sure that everyone knew is that he did not compare himself to a Catholic bishop, as the paper said. And he also wanted us to convey that when he said out of the 108 churches in our Presbytery (the paper cited 180), there had been 40 complaints of sexual misconduct. He was referring to a span of 50 years, but still a significant number. But he also wanted pastors to tell their congregations that he could count on one hand the number of instances that even compared to what we read about today. And yet still, we have to have a zero tolerance for such evil and to such complacency.

Maybe we don't think the shadows of our former life are all that bad. Maybe we don't need the light as much as someone else (this is a sermon for the person across the room, not for me). Maybe we don't see what sin is for our self. But we are children of light. And because of that, we cannot simultaneously hold onto darkness while the light is within our hearts. It has to be banished from our lives. We can't tolerate it. We cannot pretend that it doesn't matter. Isn't that the real issue? That being light means sharing that light even with those we believe are undeserving, even with those who make us uncomfortable, who get under our skin. Even with those who are inconvenient.

I fear we misunderstand or discount the essence of darkness described in Ephesians, Chapter 5. I think we are just as clueless sometimes as that little boy in that Sunday school class. We need to be reminded of other advice that had to come even after what was written in Ephesians. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves. But if we confess, he who is faithful will forgive us. Or, whoever says, "I am in the light," while hating a brother or sister is still in the darkness. Let us turn to the light and be done with turning into telephone poles. Amen.