

Focus, People!

II Peter 1:16-21, Matthew 17:1-9

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(Sing) "Woke up this morning with my mind stayed on Jesus. Woke up this morning with my mind stayed on Jesus. Woke up this morning with my mind stayed on Jesus. Allelu, Allelu, Alleluia."

Except I didn't. Wake up with my mind stayed on Jesus. Instead, my mind in the morning bears more than a little resemblance to the dog "Dug" in the animated film called "Up." It's one of the most beautiful and moving animated films I have ever seen. It's also very funny. In the midst of a story about an elderly man and a boy and a floating house that comes to earth in a far-off land, comes a hilarious subplot about an inventor who creates a collar for dogs that translates their thoughts into human speech. One dog, named Dug, shows clearly how dogs think. He talks to our heroes, Carl and Russell, but every once in a while does this: "Squirrel!" (show how this works).

I confess to you today that although I aspire to be a person like, I don't know, Desmond Tutu, who seems to be able to concentrate and find serenity and peace in a world full of trouble and distraction, who is always clearly focused and thoughtful and calm, I am instead too often just like Dug. There are too many squirrels out there.

Know what I mean? Here's my Dug routine for the last couple of weeks. I'm looking for a job. At the same time, I'm trying to do a job that has lots of moving parts to it, and

Squirrel! My son Luke is also looking for a job, and I want to help and support him and

Squirrel!! Leah is about to go to Nicaragua on a college trip and I am so excited for her to do this but it's far away and they have mosquitos there that carry things like Zika and

Squirrel! Ben is far away at college and he's missing the city because he's in the middle of nowhere and

Squirrel! Lent is coming and I have to make ashes for Wednesday and coordinate with Bonnie and Allie and

Squirrel! A bill is introduced in Connecticut to take away the driver only driver's licenses. I had been part of a coalition of folk working to pass that originally and I need to submit testimony and

Squirrel! Jewish Community Centers in Connecticut and elsewhere are targeted with bomb threats, and an interracial couple in CT has the N word spray-painted on their house. People of faith need to speak to this and

Squirrel! Immigration raids are starting and people I care about may be impacted by this and there is a gathering of folk to discuss how we can be sanctuary for undocumented immigrants and

Squirrel! I haven't checked Facebook for an hour and I'd better look and see what new injustices are emanating from the White House or anywhere else in the world and what's happening with my friend who had surgery and

Squirrel! I need to get a sermon put together and keep in mind what squirrels are calling out to all the folk who might be here in church on Sunday.

So I do what I always do when I need to focus. I read the scriptures for the Sunday coming up. This week what do I read?

"You will do well to be attentive to [Jesus] as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts."

And this.

"From the cloud, a voice said, 'This is my Son, the beloved; listen to him....And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus, himself, alone.'"

[Silence]

For the three years Jesus ministered on earth, his life must have been one squirrel after another. My child is sick...the crowd is hungry...the Pharisees are angry...this foreign woman wants help for her daughter...teach us something new...are you forgetting the old law?...John the Baptist has been beheaded...Is it I, Lord?

Regularly, we are told, Jesus went away by himself or with a small group of friends, to re-focus. To pay attention to God. To find again, in the words of the poet Wordsworth, the "central peace subsisting at the heart of endless agitation." The central peace subsisting at the heart of endless agitation.

My old friend the Rev. Donna Schaper, spoke at the gathering last Sunday to discuss how the religious community might provide sanctuary and support of various kinds for the immigrants in our midst. She said that sometimes people rise up asking that the government take the words "under God" out of the Pledge of Allegiance. But Donna feels that this would not be a good time in our history for that to happen, because everyone, everyone needs to be reminded that there is something bigger than, greater than, the United States of America.

I never thought about those words that way, but now I do. I am rarely in a situation these days where I am asked to say **that** pledge, but I am here at worship every week. I think that part of what we are doing here when we sing hymns, when we say the Lord's Prayer, when we give our offerings, is pledging ourselves to something bigger than, greater than, ourselves or any of the squirrels out there so desperately pleading for our attention. We are saying that this bigger, greater, thing can help us sort out all of those other things, many of which are much more important than squirrels. We are

saying that this bigger, greater God stops us from thinking we can, or need to, handle all of this on our own. We are NOT saying that we should escape from the issues that need attention in our lives and world and run away to God. We ARE saying that what will help us discern which squirrels to follow and which ones to let run (because we can't chase them all) is to stop. Stop and listen to Jesus, as God instructed. Take the time and the intentional focus to "be attentive as to a lamp shining in a dark place," trusting that indeed, the "morning star will rise in your heart." We need illumination.

Many of you have heard me say before, and you will hear me say it again (because I need to remind myself), that most of us live our lives too often as "functional atheists." Even as we work at church stuff sometimes. We forget to connect with God, whose light in dark places can allay our fears and show us a direction, who touches us and says "Get up and do not be afraid."

The Swedish philosopher and politician, Dag Hammarskjöld, once wrote: "That God should have time for you, you seem to take as much for granted as that you cannot have time for [God]." (Markings, p. 12).

Lent begins on Wednesday, and Lent is meant to be a time of intentional re-focusing. This Lent, let's give up chasing squirrels without focus. Let's listen. That's what God told Peter, James and John on the mountain. Listen. Focus, people, and let the squirrels go every once in a while. Listen. Amen.