

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH  
305 EAST MAIN STREET  
DURHAM, NC 27701  
PHONE: (919) 682-5511**



## **“The Wedding of Heaven to Earth”**

**A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth  
Transfiguration of the Lord (Year C)**

**February 10, 2013**

**Exodus 34:29–35; 2 Corinthians 3:12–4:2; Luke 9:28–36**

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Maybe it's the dazzling whiteness,  
or the exclamation of how good it is to be together,  
or the frenetic attempt to capture and hold onto the moment,  
or the context of prayer, or the quick descent back to business as usual,  
or maybe it's “all of the above” which reminds me so vividly of... a wedding.  
Or maybe it's because I recently had a wedding in my family and can't shake it from  
my brain or my pocketbook! At any rate, my mind draws this connection.

At a wedding, there is certainly prayer,  
and maybe prayer is the cloud which surrounds the whole event.  
There is a convergence of saints past, present, and future,  
nodding and whispering to each other about how good it is to be together.  
There is the dazzling whiteness of the bride as she makes her appearance  
and begins her long, stately walk down the aisle.  
There is also the dazzling whiteness of Kleenex moving toward eyes,  
and the dazzling whiteness of spots before the eyes of those about to faint, like me!  
There is the frenetic effort of the photographers, bending and twisting  
to capture the moment from all angles.  
There is the hush of something holy taking place, as love is voiced,  
as boys and girls are transfigured into mature and responsible adults.

And there is that face:

the face of the child you have known since birth  
that spoke volumes before words were possible,  
that looked to you trustingly for food,  
that grimaced with pain, that flushed with anger, that beamed with pride,  
that reminded you of you but also was wholly other,  
that is as full of love now, as ever.

For a second, for a moment, at a wedding, heaven seems to touch earth;

the veil between secular and sacred seems to lift; love seems to prevail.

And then suddenly it is over, and the shirt tails comes out, the makeup comes off,

the five o'clock shadow begins to show, and the hair goes back into a pony tail.

A few things to note in Luke's account of the transfiguration of Jesus:

Jesus takes Peter, James and John, his inner circle, up the mountain with him to pray.

These are the same three whom earlier Jesus escorted out of the crowd

and invited to accompany him into the house of Jairus,

where friends there were wailing and mourning

the death of Jairus' twelve-year-old daughter.

Jesus enters, takes the girl by the hand, and says, "My child get up," and the

spirit returns to her, and she stands and asks for something to eat (Luke 8:49–56).

Peter, James and John are there to witness that event, that raising of the dead,

which links Jesus' transfiguration to his own death and resurrection,

which we, believers hence, know is on the other side of the mountain.

Secondly, Peter, James and John are invited to come up the mountain

with Jesus to pray. And as he is praying, his transfiguration occurs.

Prayer is the context for transfiguration. Things happen in prayer.

You may recall that Jesus also was in prayer after his baptism

when the heavens opened and the voice of God spoke *to him*,

affirming him as God's son and the source of God's great pleasure.

Now, again in the context of prayer, the voice of God speaks from the cloud in third person

with a similar message proclaiming Jesus as both Son and Messiah.

However, this time God addresses not Jesus, but other listeners

with the added imperative to "listen to him," to listen to Jesus.

I want to say that the transfiguration prefigures the wedding of heaven to earth

that has begun in the life and ministry and will culminate

in the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ.

It is the same wedding of heaven to earth that we voice in the Lord's Prayer,

when we say, "thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven."

And it's the same wedding of heaven to earth that we herald each time we sing

in the *Hallelujah Chorus*: "The kingdom of this world is become

the kingdom of our Lord, and of His Christ."

Things happen in this moment, in Jesus' transfiguration, that are both mystical

and practical, that are both of heaven and of earth converging,

depending upon whose wisdom we honor.

British theologian NT Wright claims that in the transfiguration,

the material world that we have come to know through physics, chemistry,

astronomy, biology, botany, zoology, and other sciences

is being filled with God's glory.

What the prophet Habakkuk envisioned is coming to light: "the earth is being filled

with the knowledge of the glory of Yahweh, as the waters cover the sea" (Hab. 2:14).

We used to sing a hymn about this which I loved as a child,

"God is working His purpose out as year succeeds to year:

God is working His purpose out, and the time is drawing near;

nearer and nearer draws the time, the time that shall surely be,

when the earth shall be filled with the glory of God

as the waters cover the sea" (Arthur Campbell Ainger, 1894).

The hymn used non-inclusive language; it was imperialistic and militaristic, but I loved it

because it hinted at God's steady, hammering infusion of all of creation

with God's glory, as if creation were God's project, under construction.

Wright claims that not only in Jesus' transfiguration, but in his healings,  
in the miraculous catches of fish, in the outlandish feedings of crowds,  
in turning water to wine, in quieting storms and walking on water,  
"something new is happening, and it's happening to the material world."

(NT Wright, *Simply Jesus*, p. 140)

"These incidents are the sorts of things that might be characteristic of *new creation*,  
of fulfilled time, of what happens when heaven and earth come together,"

Wright says. (NT Wright, *Simply Jesus*, p. 141)

"What the story of Jesus on the mountain demonstrates, for those with eyes to see  
or ears to hear, is that, just as Jesus seems to be the place where God's world  
and ours meet, where God's time and ours meet,  
so he is the place where, so to speak, God's matter—God's new creation—  
intersects with ours.

As with everything else in the gospel narrative, the moment is extraordinary, but soon over.

It forms a new set of signposts," Wright says. "Jesus-shaped signposts,  
indicating what is to come: a whole new creation, starting with Jesus himself."

(Wright, *Simply Jesus*, p. 144)

This whole new creation begins at the intersection of heaven and earth,  
through the person of Jesus Christ.

Wright relates another transfiguration story from the early nineteenth century,  
mystical in nature, about a Russian disciple, Nicholas Motovilov (1809 – 1832)  
who pays a visit to Seraphim of Sarov (1754-1833), a well-known saintly hermit,  
and asked him how one could know if the Spirit of God is present.

It is a cloudy day, and they are sitting on tree stumps in the woods,  
and as Motovilov tells it:

*Then Father Seraphim gripped me firmly by the shoulders and said:*

*"My friend, both of us, at this moment, are in the Holy Spirit, you and I.*

*Why won't you look at me?"*

*"I can't look at you, Father, because the light flashing from your eyes*

*and face is brighter than the sun and I'm dazzled!"*

*"Don't be afraid, friend of God, you yourself are shining, just like I am; you, too, are now in the fullness of the grace of the Holy Spirit, otherwise you wouldn't be able to see me as you do."*

*Then I looked at the holy man and was panic-stricken. Picture, in the sun's orb, in the most dazzling brightness of its noon-day shining, the face of a man who is talking to you. You see his lips moving, the expression in his eyes, you hear his voice, you feel his arms around your shoulders, and yet... you can see only the blinding light which spread everywhere, lighting up the layer of snow covering the glade, and igniting the flakes that are falling on both of us like white powder.*

*"What do you feel?" asked Father Seraphim.*

*"An amazing well being," I replied.*

*"I feel a great calm in my soul, a peace which no words can express... a strange, unknown delight... an amazing happiness... I'm amazingly warm... There's no scent in the world like this one!"*

*"I know," said Father Seraphim, smiling. "This is as it should be, for divine grace comes to live in our hearts, within us."*

(NT Wright. *Simply Jesus*, p. 142-143)

I convey this other transfiguration story to you because to me, it brings home the point that Jesus' transfiguration is noticed and conveyed to us because the three disciples have eyes to see and ears to hear what is transpiring.

So, perhaps a transfiguration is happening to them, too.

The voice of God is directed at them, for their hearing, for their instruction:

“This is my Son, My Chosen; listen to him!”

Without their also having been in the Spirit, I doubt they ever would have seen or heard this incident of eschatological intrusion.

Without their also having been in the Spirit,

this momentary wedding of heaven to earth might have been dismissed as a random dappling of sunlight or a rogue clap of thunder.

Likewise, might we also miss many such weddings of heaven to earth!

Jesus, as you will remember, once told a parable about inviting people to a wedding and having them refuse to show up! (Matt. 22:1–14)

An earthier take on transfiguration comes from Desmond Tutu, the former archbishop from South Africa.

While sitting in a church garden one winter day, when the grass was dry and pale, he noted that one could hardly believe that in a few weeks' time, it would be lush, green and beautiful again... transfigured.

“The principle of transfiguration is at work when the tree with gnarled leafless branches bursts forth with the sap flowing so that birds sit chirping in the leafy branches, or when the once-dry streams gurgle with swift-flowing waters when winter gives way to spring and nature seems to experience resurrection.

*“The principle of transfiguration,” Tutu claims, “says nothing, no one and no situation is ‘untransfigurable,’ that the whole creation, nature, waits expectantly for its transfiguration, when it will be released from its bondage and share in the glorious liberty of the children of God, when it will not be just dry inert matter but will be translucent with divine glory.”*

(Desmond Tutu. *God Has A Dream*, p. 3)

Tutu believes that the apostle Paul, for example, was transfigured from a persecutor to a great missionary of the church.

Likewise, he believes Peter was transfigured from a denier to the prince of apostles.

And he believes that the greatest example of transfiguration is the Cross itself, which has gone from an object of revulsion to an object of reverence.

From there he posits that the release of Nelson Mandela from prison in 1990

and the move toward universal elections between 1990 and 1994 marking the end of apartheid in South Africa is nothing short of a transfiguration. "Yes, our first election turned out to be a deeply spiritual event, a religious experience, a transfiguration experience, a mountaintop experience," Tutu says. "Now here we were becoming, from all the different tribes and languages, diverse cultures, and faiths, so utterly improbably, we were becoming one nation.

Now who could ever believe that *that* was possible?"

(Desmond Tutu. *God Has A Dream*, p. 7)

Tutu says, "If you had said a few years before that South Africa would be a beacon of hope, people would have taken you to a psychiatrist. And yet it was so.

Our problems are not over—poverty, unemployment, and the AIDS epidemic—because transfiguration is ongoing," Tutu concludes.

(Desmond Tutu. *God Has a Dream*. p. 8)

In the book *Alice in Wonderland*, there is one point where Alice laments her inability to believe in impossibilities, and the White Queen encourages her with this response:

"I daresay you haven't had much practice... when I was younger, I always did it for half an hour a day.

Why sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."

(Lewis Carroll. *Alice in Wonderland*)

Maybe our ability to imagine and pray for six impossible things every day, every Sunday, at least, will help us to notice

the transfigurations taking place around us,

the places where heaven and earth are being wed

with beautiful, unexpected, and unimaginable outcomes

among the homeless, among the poor, among the violent, in the legislatures, in our marriages, in our education systems, in our health and well being.

Perhaps prayer is nothing more than believing those impossible things and believing that through Christ, they will one day be transfigured.

Last year when I was visiting New York City, I happened upon an amazing art exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art by an African artist from Ghana named El Anatsui.

The name of one of his pieces was *Between Heaven and Earth*, and I was so impressed by what this artist had created that I took notes of it on my cell phone to remember it...

which I recall now in relation to the transfiguration of Jesus.

Using the medium of cast-off soda bottle caps and copper wire, Anatsui has created this beautiful masterpiece of incredible color, scale, texture and reflectiveness that is just breath-taking.

Who could imagine used bottle caps—Coke caps, as I call them—from various types of soda bottles, carefully flattened and twisted, shaped and arranged with copper wiring to be so stunning?

One art critic said of his piece, *Between Heaven and Earth*,

"I've never seen anything like this before. Not at the Met and not anyplace else.

What I thought was an intricately woven textile design of golden and brightly-colored threads

was actually a mosaic of carefully hand-crafted bottle caps and other metallic materials that you'd typically find on the neck or lid of a bottle of spirits, all carefully shaped, arranged and strung together with thin strands of copper wire...

This work... is a highly original creation." (Mary Maru. *Visual Profile*. 2/10/11)

Cast-offs being transfigured into something beautiful?

Throw-aways being recast into something breath-taking?

The cross, the gallows, the concentration camp, the lynching tree, the assault weapon, being transformed into symbols of no-longer-tolerable inhumanity?

The poor, the mourning, the meek, the hungry, the merciful, the peacemaking, the persecuted being flattened and twisted, shaped and arranged into a stunning, glistening new creation?

We've never seen anything like this before, nor believed that it might be possible.



What the story of Jesus on the mountain exhibits,  
for those with transfigured eyes and ears,  
is that Jesus Christ seems to be the point where God's world and ours meet,  
where heaven and earth are being wed, and where God's matter—  
God's highly original creation within us and within our world—begins to take on  
the beautiful shape and form of possibility and comes to light. Amen.