

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



“A Community of Presence”
A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth
Transfiguration of the Lord (Year A)
March 2, 2014

Exodus 24:12–18; Psalm 99; Matthew 17:1–9

“Life changes fast.” Joan Didion opens *The Year of Magical Thinking*
with a sentence so unremarkable it borders on the obvious.

As she tells it, just before dinner her husband made a comment
on the relative merits of single-malt versus double-malt Scotch—
and suddenly he was dead on the floor.

Yes, life changes fast.

But the real mystery is how quickly we adjust.

How deftly we master the art of losing and come to term with what,
only yesterday, would have been unthinkable...

One day you're on top of the mountain,

“and lawyers in expensive suits are stopping you on busy corridors
to shake your hand.

The next day you are finished, and everyone at the courthouse knows it.”

Thus notes Richard Lischer in his book, *Stations of the Heart*.

(Richard Lischer, *Stations of the Heart*, pp 70–71)

One day, you're sitting around a cozy restaurant table,
laughing over lunch with friends...

One day, you're huddled among a small cache of seminary students,
deep in discussion about one of your favorite theologians...

One day, you're considering a run for public office,
chatting excitedly on a conference call with a group of supporters...

One day you're dressed to go out for a run, dropping off the kids at school,
excited because spring seems just around the corner...

The next day you are waiting somewhere deep: deep in Radiological Imaging,
deep in Nuclear Medicine, deep in Cardiology, deep in ICU,
deep in a trauma room of the Emergency Department,
deep in the valley of the shadows.

Suddenly, it can happen that fast, like lightning: life and death change can occur.
Are we spiritually ready for that transfiguring moment,
Jesus seems to ask his disciples?

Richard Lischer, in his book, asks a question which struck me as profound,
related to the premature death of his son, Adam,
who at age 33 (the approximate age of Jesus at his death)
died suddenly of metastatic melanoma.

What does the church have to offer at a time of pending suffering or death?

"The best dying is done in community, if you can find the right community,"

Lischer says. "What does the church have to offer me?"

(Lischer, *Stations of the Heart*, p.94)

It's a great question for us to be asking this week in our church

after having experienced the death of four individuals very dear to us in one week.

I have observed that our churches are very good at offering life:

abundant life, eternal life, busy life, fellowship meals, support groups,
welcome, study, music, and service.

But are we, honestly, a community in which the best dying is done?

Do we prepare ourselves and support one another,

when suddenly, like lightning, things can change for any of us,
the evening can come, the busy world can hush,
and the fever of life can be over so quickly?

And so we look to Jesus, as is our custom.

Just six days prior, Peter had made his confession of Jesus' divine sonship at Caesarea.

And Jesus responds to Peter by alluding to the path of suffering servanthood,

which lies ahead, even for God's Messiah, and for all of us who follow after him.

The journey of faith is not necessarily going to be easy or pain-free.
In preparation, perhaps, for that descent into the shades of suffering,
Jesus cobbles together a support group of his closest spiritual friends:
Peter, James and John, the devoted fishermen
who have followed him tirelessly.

This inner circle does not include his biological family,
his mother, Mary, or brothers, you will notice,
but rather his spiritual friends are drawn from Jesus' wider God-family.
These are the friends who will accompany Jesus on his journey to the cross,
even when they don't understand it completely. They will be there for him.

Flannery O'Connor says, "Being sick is like visiting another country.

Inevitably, however, the place to visit becomes your place to live."

(Richard Lischer, *Stations of the Cross*, p.93)

Do you have a small cadre of spiritual friends in the church who will accompany
you to that other country, even when they don't understand it completely?

Will they allow you the freedom and the love to become so truly human,
so frail, so defeated, so flawed, that God's glory can shine through you,
transforming you from the inside out, as it did with Jesus,
whose face shown like the sun, and his whole body shone so brilliantly that even
his garments were transformed?

Kathy Parkins is one of my spiritual friends; my bible study members are a wider
group of spiritual friends.

I can tell them that my hair is falling out from stress,
and they will not use that information to hurt me, but will use it to help me,
to direct me to take the right vitamins and to pray for me.

Maybe you have found spiritual friends in the Men of Faith,
maybe among your neighbors at Croasdaile or the Forest at Duke,
maybe among the choir or your Sunday School class,
maybe the counselor or chaplain whom you have trusted a long time.

I think a supportive community of presence should supply us not just with social friends
and acquaintances, but with genuine spiritual friends who will support us,

prayerfully and truthfully, on our journeys of life and beyond.

Secondly, do you belong to a community that tolerates and forgives inappropriateness?

Peter fills the gaping silence of transfiguration awe with two odd comments.

“It is good for us to be here”—a trite statement akin to “well, bless your heart,”

or “have a good day.” It’s not exactly a bad statement, just a little off-target.

Then he suggests that they build three booths: two smaller ones, perhaps for the prophets,

and one larger one for Jesus—kind of like our pulpits here—

which Jesus is able to overlook and ignore as a greater overshadowing occurs

and a voice implies that the building of booths is immaterial at this moment;

that the appropriate focus should be on this

“my beloved Son, my child of the covenant, my ever-pleasing one,

so pay attention and listen to him.”

I want to belong to a community of presence that will tolerate and forgive

my inappropriate comments and gaffs, and I theirs, when staring

into the face of great mystery.

We've all heard them, and we've all made them.

Don't worry, things will get better.

You are exactly where God means for you to be.

It's all for the best.

Who's going to be the executor of your will?

I want to belong to a community of presence that will forgive and forget

my thoughtless dithering in light of the greater love

that surrounds, overshadows and shines through us all.

And lastly, do you belong to a community of presence that brings light into your darkness?

It's all about light in this account of the transfiguration, which by the way,

is related in all four gospels.

Jesus' face shines *like the sun*. His garments become *as white as light*.

A *bright cloud* overshadows them.

Are we a community that brings light into people's darkness,

comfort into people's pain, hope into people's despair,
presence into people's loneliness and isolation?

My favorite line in Matthew's transfiguration story is Jesus' imperative to his friends:

"Rise, and have no fear." And Jesus touches them when he says this.

Does anything allay fear more assuredly than a simple, human touch?

There are 365 times in the bible where someone says,

"Fear not!" One time for every day of the year
if you want to look at it that way.

A community of presence encourages us daily to walk in the light, even in the face
of suffering, death, grief, loss, disappointment and discouragement.

"Rise, and have no fear." What a strong and encouraging imperative!

In John's Gospel, Jesus proclaims himself "the Light of the World" (John 8:12).

But in Matthew's Gospel, it is the community of faith that is called to be salt and light:

salt, like the earth's and light like a city on a hill,
like a candle on a bushel basket, like a lamp to the whole house
(Matt. 5:12-16), shining to glorify our Father in heaven,
shining to reflect Jesus' light.

Are we a community that brings light to people, that bears light into the world?

That light can take many forms: cards, phone calls, emails, visits, flowers,
worship bulletins, meals, cookies, rides, hugs, shared stories, shared tears, listening,
or physical presence.

Eric Wiebe, who leads the Journeys Sunday School class with Andy Henry,
circulated an article recently from *The New York Times* by David Brooks
entitled "[The Art of Presence.](#)"

It spoke about how a community can be salt and light to someone walking fearfully close
to the valley of the shadow.

"Do Be There," Brooks says.

"Some people think that those who experience trauma need space to sort things through.
Assume the opposite. Most people need presence."

Even if you don't know a person well, show up and offer love.

“Do Bring Soup,” Brooks notes.

“The non-verbal expressions of love are as healing as eloquence.”

One visitor to a family in trauma noticed the family didn't have a bath mat,
so he went to Target and purchased one for them.

Tangible expressions of love are okay.

“Do Be A Builder,” Brooks adds.

“Firefighters drop everything and arrive at the moment of crisis.

Builders are there for years and years, walking alongside as the victims
live in the world.

What seems to be needed,” Brooks continues, “is the art of presence—

to perform tasks without trying to control or alter the elemental situation.

Allow nature to take its course.

Grant sufferers the dignity of their own process. Let them define meaning.

Sit simply through moments of pain and uncomfortable darkness.

Be practical, mundane, simple and direct.”

[\(David Brooks, “The Art of Presence,” *The New York Times*, 1/20/14\)](#)

And I would add... be light!

When I was a young adult growing up in Charlotte,

I would have defined my home church there as nice, but frankly boring, stuffy,
obtuse, old-fashioned, gray suited, highly educated and verbose.

But when my mother experienced a recurrence of breast cancer in 1979,

that church sprang into quiet action and started showing up at our house,
unrequested, unannounced, with offers of meals, rides, cards,
shopping runs, visits, flowers, hugs, good words... things we needed before
we even knew we needed them or asked for them.

And our family was overwhelmed, overshadowed by what I can only call

a great bright cloud of witnesses that helped us to absorb the shock
of what was happening to us,

which allowed us the grace of time and freedom to be an unencumbered

presence to my mother, for which I am eternally grateful.
We came to experience Jesus, the Light of the World, shining like a city on a hill,
like a candle on a bushel basket, like a lamp to the whole house,
radiating through that stuffy church in transforming ways.
And I would say that my home church was transfigured before my very eyes,
through their simple, sometimes uncomfortable acts of presence,
suffused and radiant with the love of God.
To this day, it is my seminal experience of church, the one that overwhelms me still,
the one that has compelled me to minister, to bless, to reflect, to testify.
The body of Christ can become transfigured, just as the person of Christ
was once transfigured. The obtuse and opaque can become transparent.

Jesus was not yet dead; that would come all too soon.

Nor was he sick or diminished in any physical way.

But what became clear on that high mountain apart
to his spiritual friends who were present with him and present for him
was that Jesus was imbued with a numen, a spiritual presence, a light,
that emanated from within, that could only be matched by the bright cloud
that enveloped them all.

God the Father, his Father, was his all in all: his inner essence and his outer mantle,
his inner breath and his outer vapor, his inner spark and his outer light.

And his friends could only fall on their faces in awe at that moment's realization of
a supernatural presence and a light

that leans towards us

out of the ominous shadows of suffering and death,

Rise and do not be afraid. Have no fear. Fear not. Jesus' touch is on our shoulder.

The overshadowing power of the Father's love shines within the Son,
and the far-reaching power of the Son shines through the beloved community
of which we are a part,

empowering us to be bearers of his light to the world. Amen.