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## **“Baptized Into This, Too”**

**A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth  
Transfiguration of the Lord**

**February 19, 2012**

**2 Kings 2:1–12; Psalm 50:1–6; 2 Corinthians 4:3–6; Mark 9:1–8**

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A terrible privilege, that’s how I would label it.

Earlier this month, I had the terrible privilege

of participating in the funeral service of one of my nephews,  
who died young, at age 21;

who died tragically, as do all young people who

die before their appointed days on earth are lived out;

who died young and tragically at age 21 of a drug overdose.

He picked up the habit accidentally, literally,

when he emerged from a car-totalling accident at age 16

with nothing more than a broken hip, for which he was prescribed  
physical therapy and a handful of pain killers.

He passed the physical therapy protocols with flying colors;

however, he never escaped the grip or the power of the pain killers.

Their pull on him only escalated. Their power over him only consumed.

Their hold on his life only abated when they had taken him out completely.

The drugs and those who deal them transfigured my beautiful, sweet, smart nephew  
into quite another being whom we hardly recognized,

whom we winced to receive,

whom we struggled to relate to as he bounced in and out of rehab.

His funeral was one of the saddest services that I’ve ever attended,

much less been asked to participate in.

It was a terrible privilege to stand before broken family members,  
swimmy-eyed young adults, his former girlfriend, who sat on the front row  
and wailed;

to proclaim the Word and celebrate the Sacrament into that context.

A celebration it hardly seemed, yet it was.

When the presiding priest in the Episcopal Church stood and welcomed  
the congregation and said, "It is good for us to be here today,"

I wondered to myself "What's so good about it?"

Haven't we lost a beloved child of God here?

Hasn't something very evil claimed someone very good, and won?

Hasn't the last five years wreaked havoc in all of our lives?

Haven't we all been incapable of ministering to the real pain that my nephew  
was experiencing?

When Jesus summons his inner circle of disciples, Peter, James and John,

to come away with him to the mountaintop six days later,

he summons them to step away from three things that have transpired

just six days prior for some fresh air and a new perspective.

A recognition has transpired: "You are the Christ!" Peter has proclaimed,

not Elijah, not John the Baptist, as others claim, but "You are the Christ!" (Mk. 8:28–30)

"Shhhh," Jesus responds, "Now don't go spreading that in public."

A prediction has transpired: the first passion prediction in Mark's Gospel.

Jesus teaches his disciples the strange truth about his identity, his Messiah-ship:

that God's glory will be hidden in his suffering,

and that God's glory will be revealed only through his great suffering, rejection,

death, and resurrection (Mk. 8:31–32a).

This revelation will not come to the world the easy way.

It will take the hard way, God's way, to reveal the true divine glory

woven into the warp and woof of Jesus' very being.

Ironically, there is no summons to secrecy about this good news.

Mark says that Jesus tells it plain, no shhhhh-ing this time.

Then a promise takes place: some of you standing around  
will see the Kingdom of God come with power in your own lifetimes (Mk. 9:1).

Again, no shhh-ing, no secrets here.

And then he whisks the three away to the mountaintop for a change of venue,  
and change they get!

A theophany occurs there that we're not even sure that Jesus knew was coming.

A theophany, a manifestation of God, occurs where Jesus stands speechless,  
where Jesus conveys no emotion,  
where a brilliant white light emanates through Jesus' dust-laden clothes,  
eye-popping, dazzling, whiter than bleaching,  
suggestive of the splendor of God's glory, God's Shekinah, הַנִּיכָשׁ,  
the divine presence in the world.

A theophany occurs that hearkens back to Jesus' baptism,  
where the Holy Spirit appears not as dove, but as cloud;  
where the voice of God again does all the talking,  
claiming Jesus as "my Son," as "my Beloved,"  
instructing disciples this time to listen and obey him.

Jesus is transfigured, metamorphosed before the disciples,  
as the brilliant divine slip of his identity shows through his dingy outer garments.

Jesus is outed: his paternity no secret, his identity no longer under a bushel,  
his belovedness made public, his mission infused with God's affirmation  
that God's glory will suffuse his suffering, rejection, even his death.

Two saints, Moses and Elijah,  
who themselves had suffered greatly at the hand of tyrants,  
Moses to Pharaoh, and Elijah to Ahab and Jezebel,  
join the transfigured conversation. (Chrysostom)

And Peter as witness, can only blather, "It is good for us to be here,"  
because what do you say when all color fades to white,  
when voices come from clouds, when visuals and audibles  
suggest a divine presence so close  
that one would do anything to contain it, to keep it nearby?

How does one keep from fainting before such brilliance?

I thought about baptism a lot at my nephew's funeral, actually.

In part of the funeral liturgy, we read the passage from Romans 6:3–5:

“When we were baptized in Christ Jesus, we were baptized into his death.  
We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death,  
so that, as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father,  
we too might live a new life. For if we have been united with Christ  
in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him  
in a resurrection like his.”

But what I was thinking at my nephew's funeral was not so much about death  
and resurrection; that was a given.

What I was thinking about was this passage and the words that dazzle here:

*God-power, transfigured, metamorphosed, changed,  
good, my, beloved, son, Jesus only.*

If we are baptized into Jesus' death and resurrection, as we claim in our liturgy,  
then we are baptized into this, too, into the mystery of Christ's transfiguration  
and its inherent web of glowing words:

*God-power, transfigured, metamorphosed, changed,  
good, my, beloved, son, Jesus only.*

And this can only be described as *grace* for us, even in the face of great suffering and pain.

One of my favorite theologians, Princeton's Ellen Charry, describes baptism as being

“grafted into the divine life, sanctified by being chrismated, signed with oil,  
by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own forever...”

To be baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit  
is to be set into the Trinity for life in this world  
and in preparation for the next.”

She says baptism “renders those created in the image of God into heirs  
of the biblical promises to inherit the kingdom of God.

This God-given dignity supplies us with a source of strength with which  
to fight the powers of evil that threatens to overwhelm us.

The dignity of God is formally given to the individual by and in the sacrament  
(which) is a cause of great celebration.

Baptism becomes the drumbeat to which Christians march—  
the beacon that offers security and hope...

It means that one is never alone but always accompanied by the Holy Spirit  
and the fullness of the Trinity itself."

(Ellen T. Charry. "Spiritual Formation by the Doctrine of the Trinity." *Theology Today*, October,  
1997)

If Jesus is transfigured by divine glorification,  
by divine brightness that leeches through his dingy outer garments,  
by a transparency that reveals God's hidden purpose at work even through  
suffering, pain, torment, rejection and death,  
by a belonging that claims him above and beyond all familial birthrights,  
by a belovedness that silences all other voices which might suggest otherwise,  
then so are we likewise, by virtue of our baptism,  
heirs to this mystery and its powerful courage, comfort, and hope.

Our lives are not our own; they belong to God,  
who ultimately works and will work all things for the good.

As Christians, we are baptized into great mysteries, like transfiguration, like resurrection,  
like Holy Communion, which we can neither fully understand nor articulate.

We tend to either stand dumbstruck, like James and John,  
or fumble about for adequate verbiage or appropriate action, like Peter,  
or come at it sideways, like I am having to do this morning.

But these mysteries are ours for the claiming, nevertheless:

for claiming the God-given dignity therein,  
for claiming the strength, courage, and comfort therein,  
for claiming the power to keep fighting evil therein,  
for claiming the accompaniment of the triune God therein,  
who follows us all the days of our lives,  
and deigns us "beloved," *no matter what transpires*.

And this can only be described as *grace*, even in the face of great suffering and pain.

And even as I mourn with my brother's family the loss of a man/child of such promise,  
his life cut short too early, too soon,

I take comfort in the fact of his baptism,

and in the dignity and goodness conferred upon him, in life and in death  
by this sacrament.

I want to close with a poem, which suggests to me

something of the mystery of Jesus' transfiguration,

which renders those who experience it awestruck by the mystery.

Jesus' transfiguration is quite beyond explication or description,

yet filled with the grace of divine accompaniment and encouragement made flesh,

and a glimpse of the glory of God dwelling with humankind, (Chrysostom)

that is both life-affirming and death-defying.

The poem is by Nebraskan Ted Kooser, the US Poet Laureate from 2004–2006, himself  
a courageous cancer survivor.

### **At the Cancer Clinic**

She is being helped toward the open door  
that leads to the examining rooms  
by two young women I take to be her sisters.

Each bends to the weight of an arm  
and steps with straight, tough bearing  
of courage. At what must seem to be  
a great distance, a nurse holds the door,  
smiling and calling encouragement.

How patient she is in the crisp white sails  
of her clothes. The sick woman  
peers from under her funny knit cap  
to watch each foot swing scuffing forward  
and take its turn under her weight.

There is no restlessness or impatience  
or anger anywhere in sight. Grace  
fills the clean mold of this moment  
and all the shuffling magazines grow still. (Ted Kooser)

So may God's transfiguring grace fill the mold of our most challenging moments. Amen.