

Down to Earth

A meditation given by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on March 13, 2022

Friendship Presbyterian Church

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit ...

But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you ...

So, we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.
(II Corinthians 3:17-18; 4:7-18, NRSV)

It's truly a joy to do this – over these first four Sundays of Lent, exploring one great hymn tune per week – through liturgy, congregational singing, and choir music, with Kevin speaking to the historical and musical backgrounds of the selections, and with me offering a short homily to bring it all together! And what a start we had to this Hymns series last week, as we celebrated “Simple Gifts,” and the Shaker tradition of bringing together simplicity, humble living, and sacred dance.

Today, we shift focus to the Welsh tune *Hyfrydol*, best known for being the tune to Charles Wesley's classic hymn “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling.” This has long been one of my favorites, and quite possibly one of yours. Those of us who do love it so much are certainly transported by its stirring final verse, and most of all, its final phrases –

*Finish, then, Thy new creation;
Pure and spotless let us be;
Let us see Thy great salvation
Perfectly restored in Thee;
**Changed from glory into glory,
Till in heaven we take our place,
Till we cast our crowns before Thee,
Lost in wonder, love, and praise.***

“Lost in wonder, love, and praise.”

What stunningly beautiful words. And what an image: Of being brought into our eternal home, where we take our place, “casting our crowns” before the Throne of God, “lost in wonder, love, and praise.” It may be the most moving, evocative description of heaven ever expressed in hymnody.

We are not wrong to love this. It’s not wrong for our attention to naturally move to this. But the thing is, if you carefully read the first three verses of the hymn, it’s not really *focused* on heaven at all. Certainly, all is ultimately *fulfilled* there, but the real point – the point that the Wesley brothers lived their lives for – is God’s gift of himself in the *here and now*, in the midst of trembling hearts and a messy world.

We know that the season of Lent soberly calls us to face our humanity and our mortality, to recognize that “we are dust, and to dust we will return.” We saw last week how that Lenten truth calls us to simplicity and gratitude. This week, it calls us to see that the gospel we cherish is truly a “down to earth” gospel – God making home *in us* and *among us*.

Recall that beautiful text that Lisa read a few moments ago. It’s from the very end of the Bible, as *all* is fulfilled, as all history moves to its God-ordained conclusion. It would be easy to hear its strange, poetic words as referring to a celestial place beyond the clouds and the stars. But it tells of a new heaven and a new earth, and the holy city, the new Jerusalem, *coming down out of heaven from God!* And the voice from the Throne then declaring:

*See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them;
they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them ...*

So much religion, so much Christianity as it’s been presented through the ages, would have us look *upward* and *away* for God, when all the while the whole direction of the biblical story is God desiring to make a home – *here*. The essence of the gospel can be summed up in *one phrase* from the Gospel of John: “The Word became flesh and lived among us” ... and who taught us to pray, saying “Thy Kingdom *come*, thy will be done *on earth*, as it [already] is in Heaven.”

This essential truth is the key to this great hymn, for John and Charles Wesley understood that whatever else “Heaven” may mean for us, it’s meant to *start* here, to be *experienced* even *here*, and *now*, as the gracious gift of the *presence* of God – one determined to make a home among us. The very first verse sets the stage –

*Love divine, all loves excelling,
Joy of heaven to earth come down,*

*Fix in us Thy humble dwelling,
All Thy faithful mercies crown!
Jesus, Thou art all compassion,
Pure, unbounded love Thou art;
Visit us with Thy salvation,
Enter every trembling heart.*

And so, it continues, as the longing, heartfelt invitation it is. Notice all the times it humbly prays for the life of God to *live in us*. Be astonished at its bold plea for the holiness of Heaven to enter this all-too-human mortal frame – to cleanse and set free for joy and praise:

**Breathe, O breathe Thy loving Spirit
Into every troubled breast!**

Let us all in Thee inherit,
Let us find the promised rest;
Take away the love of sinning;
Alpha and Omega be;
End of faith, as its beginning,
Set our hearts at liberty.

Come, Almighty to deliver,
Let us all Thy life receive;
Suddenly return, and never,
Nevermore Thy temples leave.
Thee we would be always blessing,
Serve Thee as Thy hosts above,
Pray, and praise Thee without ceasing,
Glory in Thy perfect love.

And so, when I sing these words to this beautiful music, I can see with my heart's eyes more clearly than ever that, by the love and grace of God, the treasures of the Spirit do *not* shun the mortal and the fragile, for as Paul declared,

we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.

In this way, the gospel is truly “down to earth” – a story of how God imparts to our own trembling hearts and fleeting lives in this world the substance of His own heart, his own life, and thereby makes home among us, such that we are never alone, and may pray and praise Him without ceasing, until that day when all is fulfilled, and we cast our crowns before Him, lost in wonder, love and praise.

To the Glory of God! Amen.