

Isn't that a tremendous text The Tabernacle Choir has sung? "Sing and Be Not Silent." It fits well with the text from Isaiah 62:1, which Karen read. There are times when silence is very inappropriate. This is especially true when it comes to salvation's joy in Easter's blessing of Resurrection. God always seems to be saving the best for last. Hugo Culpepper seems to have done that as well.

Now I realize most of you don't know who Hugo Culpepper was. He and his wife, Ruth, were appointed Baptist missionaries to China in 1940. As a result of World War II, they never really served in China, although they were there for a short period of time. They were taken to the Philippines where, from December 1941 to February 1945, they were held prisoners in a Japanese concentration camp. While they were never really mistreated, they were on the verge of starvation during their internment.

After the war, they served in Chile and then in Argentina, before resigning their commissions to return to Louisville where Hugo would complete his doctorate and join the faculty of his and my alma mater, Southern Seminary, in 1958. For a season, 1965 to 1970, he was the Director of the Missions Divisions of what is now the North American Mission Board in Alpharetta.

He then returned to Southern where he taught missions until his retirement in 1981. He was there during my days as a graduate student in the master's program. Whenever I think of Hugo Culpepper, I have only one regret: I didn't take him for Christian missions. I'm glad I was fortunate enough to go to Chapel Services and hear him preach at least once. He wasn't the silent type. In the spirit of the choir's anthem, he was one to speak and sing boldly about his faith in Christ and what Christ had done for him.

His son, Alan, was a New Testament professor while I was there back in the late 70s and early 80s. Alan was the first Dean of the McAfee School of Theology, founded in 1995 at Mercer University. Of interest, Tabernacle was one of the founding churches and we continue to contribute to the vital ministry of this quality seminary as it trains men and women for a lifetime of ministry. Alan continues to serve as Dean.

I'm nearly finished with a book, written by Alan, which was published in 2002. Entitled Eternity As A Sunrise, it is a biography about his father, Hugo. It is a wonderful memoir of Alan's own recollections and those of his brother along with what seems to be an endless run of letters that Hugo wrote and letters written to him, in addition to dairy entries during his confinement in that Japanese concentration camp.

This profound story of a farm boy from a small Arkansas town, who dared to live far beyond the horizons of his early years, both literally and symbolically, acknowledges a lifelong effort to find and follow God in his life. Never afraid of a challenge, Hugo wasn't frightened by developing a sound theology of missions that was biblically based. What is intriguing and refreshing to me is that near the end of his career, he dared to explore the challenges for missions as the world was becoming smaller and smaller as a result of technology and especially since the world was coming to these shores.¹ Perhaps his best years were the last. Maybe the best of his career was intentionally saved for last. His very life, in my estimation, was a miracle of God's grace as the Father placed His hand upon a servant who would challenge others and himself for the entirety of his life.

Hugo had a Good Example when it came to challenges. All of us do. Jesus, that Example, was never afraid of a challenge. Talk about not being silent! Whether it was casting a demon out of a person's tormented life or healing someone who suffered from a fever or raising someone from the dead or taking on the religious upper class, Jesus wasn't afraid to rise to the occasion. One thing that leaps from the stories about Jesus, provided in the Four Gospel accounts, is that the best seems to always be

saved for the last. And at no place, outside His own Resurrection from the dead, is this better affirmed than in the story of Jesus attending a wedding in the village of Cana up in Galilee.

In this text, which records the first miracle of Jesus, – at least from John’s perspective – we discover much more than some guy crashing a wedding party and taking 120 to 180 gallons of Dasani, at his mother’s insistence, and turning it into the best wine ever. I’m not a connoisseur of wines so I don’t have the name for one. It was late last night when I thought of Dasnai water and a particular wine name, but too late to call one of the Pastoral Team members or one of the Deacons to get the name of a highfalutin wine. If all there is to this event is wine, then there’s not too much to it. Most of us are just focused on the wine.

Maybe you’ve heard the story about the minister driving over to Atlanta from Alabama to see the Braves’ play baseball and he was stopped just across the Georgia line for speeding. Some say it may have been here in Carroll County. The Georgia State Patrolman smelled alcohol on his breath, and then he saw an empty wine bottle on the floor. He asked, “Sir have you been drinking?” The minister said, “Just water.” The trooper said, “Then why do I smell wine and see a wine bottle on the floor?” The minister replied, “Praise the Lord! It’s a miracle! Jesus has changed water into wine again!”

There is more to this story. It struck me that this “water into wine” stuff was inconsequential. Big deal. It could very well have been wine into water. What also strikes me is that nobody seemed to be excited about the “miracle” itself there in Cana. They were excited about the wine, but not the miracle. Compared to what they had been drinking this was good stuff – not to say the first bottles of wine were bad. It’s just that this stuff Jesus made was beyond good and it was presented near the end of the party instead of the beginning. In that day the best wine, the best of anything for that fact of the matter, was given first. The steward, who was in charge, told this newly wed husband, “Man! You’re all right! How clever! You’ve saved the best for last.”

That day in Cana Jesus really shined. Once they learned He had provided the wine, He surely became the talk of the party. The text says as a result of the miracle, Jesus revealed His “*glory*” (v. *11b*). While His disciples, the text says, “*believed in him*” (v. *11b*), they may not have fully comprehended until after His Ascension into Heaven. Be assured that the good folks to whom John was writing his Gospel back in the latter part of the first century, decades after this sign was manifested in Cana, did understand.

They understood there was more in this text than merely changing water into wine for a party. They grasped the point. “If Jesus can do that, change water into wine, then He can change us, too.” That is the point of this story. This is what the text concerns. It records a miracle that points to a greater miracle: a miracle of conversion – yours and mine. No wonder the best is saved for last! Even in death, which is the last thing in life for us, transformation can take place.

“Really?” you ask. Really. Transformation can and does take place. Did death have the final say in Jesus’ life? Of course it didn’t. Does it have the final say in anybody’s life that is a believer in Jesus? Of course it doesn’t. Easter is written all over this miracle and we’re given a clue in verse one: “*On the third day, there was wedding in Cana of Galilee...*” You heard it, didn’t you? “*Third Day.*” The best is saved for last and the best for the saved is Resurrection. I had never thought of it like this until Friday evening: specifically that the first Easter was sort of a wedding day that served to inaugurate a way of life that would continue forever.

That’s what a wedding is. It is the launching pad from which a marriage begins that is supposed to last until “death do us part.” Remember your wedding day? I remember mine. It was wonderful as Jackie joined our lives together – physically, emotionally, and spiritually. What a day it was! But more than the day, I am more in tune with the life she and I share – a way of life that continues to bless. It does get better everyday.

A wife remarked to her husband while they attended the wedding of a friend's daughter: "Don't weddings give you an appetite for life?" The husband replied, "I hadn't thought about it." The wife, who like her husband was a Christian, then said, "Don't think about it. Feel. It's time for feeling and not thinking. Why do you think Mary had her Son make all that wine at Cana? She wanted the party to continue."

And why wouldn't she? Especially in light of what she knew as a result of what she had learned from that great prophet Isaiah. Like the anthem the choir sang, this text Karen spoke from Isaiah 62:1-5 acknowledges the vindication of God and the light of His salvation that shines in a dark and lost land. It also declares that God will not keep silent when it comes to His people, whom He loves. His people, devastated by captivity at the hands of the Babylonians six centuries before Jesus turned that water into wine, would become His Delight and as a "*bridegroom rejoices over the bride*" (v 5c) so God would rejoice over them. The best was saved for last, even in Isaiah's day. Even the language of Isaiah indicates this. It affirms that a party is going to take place.

And what a party it was when Jesus finally showed up. What a party it is for you and me, which began at our conversions – yours and mine. And it continues throughout our lives on this earth. Oh, how we are to appreciate that the best days for each of us are in the future. Sure the days past were good. But the best is always ahead of us or it should be. Tabernacle has done good things in her 104-year history. But even better things are in store for her in the decades to come because Jesus is always seeking to work His power in our lives, power that will change us into something that we're not, just as He changed H₂O into the best wine ever. The best really is saved for last as we head for a better life – the best life – in Eternity.

It is a life characterized by love and Kathleen Norris, in her book, Amazing Grace, captures the essence of the best at the last as she shares her favorite definition of heaven, which came to her from a Benedictine sister. As her mother lay dying in a hospital bed, the sister had ventured to reassure her by saying, "In heaven, everyone we love is there." The older woman replied, "No, in heaven I will love everyone who is there."² You can't keep silent about that can you? Hugo Culpepper sure didn't. Even during his internment by the Japanese.

Hugo died on November 25, 2000. His beloved wife, Ruth, died four months later on March 26, 2001. My dear friend, Bob Browning, Pastor at Smoke Rise Baptist Church in Stone Mountain, conducted their interments. Hugo preached during my second year of seminary in one of those chapel services I attended in 1980. While I don't remember the content of his sermon, I was moved by his passion. The sermon appears in his biography. One thing he said that moved me is this: "Perhaps I am being lifted to a larger view in my knowledge of God. I believe that eternity is a long, long climb upward. And frankly, I am looking forward to it with the greatest of anticipation."³

For him the best really was saved for last. As you and I, like Hugo and Ruth Culpepper, make our way on a long, long upward climb to eternity, let us do so with the greatest of anticipation. Let us see the face of Jesus shining as He works to change us into the best people imaginable. Let's not be silent. Let's speak and sing. If Jesus can change water into wine, surely He can change us. I do believe He can. And I do believe that you believe He can. He's saved the best for last. So what are you saving? Maybe I should ask, "Are you saved for the last?" You answer.

Sermon by Dr. Jimmy Gentry, Pastor of Tabernacle Baptist Church of Carrollton, GA
All scriptures, unless otherwise noted, are from the New Revised Standard Version, 1989

¹ R. Alan Culpepper, Eternity As A Sunrise: The Life of Hugo H. Culpepper (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2002).

² Kathleen Norris, Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), p. 367.

³ Hugo Culpepper, "The Bible and Religious Authority," sermon preached at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, KY, October 22, 1980 as quoted in Eternity As A Sunrise, p. 354. The entire sermon appears on pp. 329-334.