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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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2 Kings 4:42-44, John 6:1-21
From the Mountain into the Storm

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹⁸The sea rose because a strong wind was blowing. ¹⁹When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and drawing near to the boat. They were frightened, ²⁰but he said to them, "It is I; do not be afraid." (John 6:18, RSV)

To my mind, there is a similarity of movement between today's Gospel story about the feeding of the five thousand and another of our favorite stories here at Immanuel -- the story of the Transfiguration of Our Lord, the story depicted in the painting above our altarpiece. In both stories, calmness is replaced by chaos, and then, in each story, Jesus strides right into that chaos and brings peace again.

In this morning's story, we have the miracle of Jesus feeding the five thousand people who have come to hear him preach. It is a mountain story, with a churchly air about it. It is an elevated and calm story. There is no famine, no grumbling of the people. Jesus has gathered with his disciples on a mountain, he lifts his eyes and sees that a multitude is coming to him, and in a sovereign way, he feeds that multitude. The provisions had been poor -- five small loaves of bread and two fish -- and what are they among so many? But no matter! They are enough, and more than enough, in the hands of the great Master of that mountain. The five thousand folk peacefully sit in groups and are fed, with twelve baskets of fragments left over. It is the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves.

Likewise, the story of the Transfiguration of Our Lord is a mountain story, again with a churchly air about it. Indeed, the signs of holiness are everywhere in that story. Jesus is transfigured before his disciples. Great and ancient men of God - Moses and Elijah - are present with Jesus. The robes of Jesus are radiant:

And his raiment became shining, exceeding white as snow; so as no fuller on earth can white them. (Mark 9:3, KJV)

A cloud overshadows them and the voice of the heavenly Father is heard:

And there was a cloud that overshadowed them: and a voice came out of the cloud, saying, This is my beloved Son: hear him. (Mark 9:7, KJV)

Indeed, it is such a sanctified scene that Peter does not want to leave:

⁵And Peter answered and said to Jesus, Master, it is good for us to be here: and let us make three tabernacles; one for thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elias. ⁶For he wist not what to say; for they were sore afraid. (Mark 9:5-6, KJV)

But, it is the nature of things that few of us can stay up on the mountain, few of us retreat from this world's hurly-burly for long. And so it is that the Transfiguration story is immediately followed by the story of the "healing of the lunatic boy," as it is sometimes called. Raphael's great painting of the Transfiguration includes that story too. You see a heartbroken father, a boy, a son whose poor body is twisted with the turmoil of the demons within. We see disciples who are confused and unable to help:

¹⁷And one of the multitude answered and said, Master, I have brought unto thee my son, which hath a dumb spirit; ¹⁸And wheresoever he taketh him, he teareth him: and he foameth, and gnasheth with his teeth, and pineth away: and I spake to thy disciples that they should cast him out; and they could not. (Mark 9:17-18, KJV)

What a contrast with the majestic story of the Transfiguration of our Lord. But no matter. Jesus, who had just conversed with Moses and Elijah up on the mountain, strides into the bedlam of the lunatic boy and calmly heals him. Nor does Jesus overly criticize the disciples for their inability to have done the same:

²⁸And when he was come into the house, his disciples asked him privately, Why could not we cast him out? ²⁹And he said unto them, This kind can come forth by nothing, but by prayer and fasting. (Mark 9:28-29, KJV)

Likewise in today's story from John 6: the sublime story of the feeding of the five thousand is soon followed by the disciples coming down from that mountain, entering into a boat, and hence into a storm.

And isn't that what life is like? I mean, here you are, safe and sound in church. By faith, we know ourselves to be in the presence of God, in the Blessed

Sacrament, wherever two or three are gathered together in his name.¹ But err long, you will get up from these pews and head back out into the city, and, for all you know, you might be plunging smack into a storm.

In 1984, Bruce Springsteen's great album, *Born in the USA*, included a rocking song called "Cover Me." One of the verses goes thus:

Outside's the rain, the driving snow
I can hear the wild wind blowing
Turn on the light
Bolt the door
I ain't going out there no more
This whole world is out there just trying to score
I've seen enough I don't want to see any more
Cover me
Come on and cover me

Many a person can understand this -- the sense that the world outside is wild and dangerous and quite indifferent usward, and that it sure would be nice if there were someone in our life who could give us some shelter. "Come on in and cover me."

Such spiritual oscillation, from peace and the presence of God, down the mountain and smack into a storm where we cry out for someone to cover us -- such movement can land us in a variety of storms. They are not all the same. Let me speak of three kinds of storms that beset our human race, including Christians. First, I will speak of the storm of discouragement. Second, the hot storm of temptation. And third, the storm of exhaustion.

First, discouragement. My wife Carol recently told me the sad story of a woman she knows who prays every night that God will take her in the night, but then she wakes up again in the morning and finds that she has to suffer through another day. Our hearts go out her, I am sure. Jesus taught us to pray in a childlike way, to not be overly critical of our own prayers, to bring our requests to the heavenly Father in a heartfelt way and to trust the matter over to him. So, this dear elderly woman does that. She lays her head down on the pillow with the pray that God would take her home in the nighttime, only to wake up the following morning and have to say, "Darn! I'm still alive."

I bet we can understand something of her turmoil. She might have been an independent, self-supporting kind of lady all her life, but now she is frail and grieves to be a burden on others. If any of you should be feeling that way, if any of your should be caught in a storm of discouragement, let me suggest to you, as

¹ For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them. (Matthew 18:20, KJV)

gently as I can, two thoughts. First, it is not so bad to be a burden to others. That dear lady who now grieves to be a burden to other no doubt carried other people's burdens during the course of a long life. From childcare, to the claims of friendship, to caring for her own elderly parents, she might well have done her fair share of burden-carrying, and now it is her turn for someone to carry her.

And the other thought I would whisper to her is that it is the nature of Jesus to accompany down from the majestic heights all the way into the storm on the sea. "It is I," Jesus say, "do not be afraid."

¹⁹When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and drawing near to the boat. They were frightened, ²⁰but he said to them, "It is I; do not be afraid." ²¹Then they were glad to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat was at the land to which they were going.

Though that elderly lady might be discouraged and praying to die, it is still the case that as long as she has life, she has Jesus at her side and she has a chance to do some good in this world. Indeed, she might be the one most perfectly placed to touch someone's heart and to help build God's kingdom in the time that remains to her.

Second, let me speak briefly of the hot storms of temptation. For all we know, when we leave Immanuel's pews today, we will soon find ourselves aflame with desire for that which we ought not to have. It is our daily prayer that God would "lead us not into temptation," and the plain meaning of that petition is that we might enjoy some peace in life and not be twisted this way and that by temptation. Yet, if that plain meaning should not be granted us, then there is the other meaning of the petition - the meaning stressed by Martin Luther and by many preachers over the years: if we cannot be spared temptation, then, please God, grant us grace to triumph over the temptation.

God's kingdom has not yet come. Sin, death, and the devil have not been cast forth out of reality. And until that happens, you and I are subject to temptations of greed, lust, wrath, and the desire to humiliate others.

To us tempted ones, I also want to speak of Jesus who descends the majestic mountain and goes to his storm-tossed disciples on the sea. Let us remember, and in remembering be made stronger, that the Jesus at whose Cross we are soon to kneel in the Blessed Sacrament is the same Jesus who was well-acquainted with temptation, but yielded not. We read often that he was a man of prayer, that he even spent whole evenings in prayer. Yet for all that praying, he also knew temptation -- even hot temptation, even searing temptation. We know this because of the stories of his desert temptations, his agonizing prayers

in Gethsemane, and because of the apostolic witness that he was “in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin.”²

¹³There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it. (1 Corinthians 10:13, KJV)

Let us take our faith at its word and go for it! That is, when we are right in the flames of temptation, let us say, “Ahh, but the apostle says I can overcome, and so I mean to do it. Watch out, Satan, I mean to be true!”

I will touch on my third kind of storm just briefly. It deserves a sermon on its own. I am speaking of the storm of exhaustion, that tempest in which the demands on you, on your time, on your strength, and on your patience threaten to overwhelm you.

My theme about such a storm is that the Jesus who comes walking to his disciples on the sea and who says to them, “It is I, have no fear,” is a man like you and me, except for sin. But in every other way, he knew your plight, including your exhaustion. Why! Is he not the one who from time to time withdrew from the crowds to a lonely place apart, who encouraged his disciples to do so too when he saw the signs of weariness in them? And is he not the one who collapsed under the weight of the Cross? Impossible thought, yet true: the One who upholds all creation and saves from falling back into chaos is also the One who fell under the weight of a single part of his creation, a mere wooden cross. That is how weary he was. And so when he speaks of your weariness, he knows very well that of which he speaks:

²⁸Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. (Matthew 11:28, KJV)

And I hope it has worked out in your life, or soon will, that you have someone in your life, or many people in your life, who can cover you, who can give you shelter. But this is what I believe about that: these ones dear to you will shelter you best if they can do so following the example of Jesus Christ. And you yourself will best cover others if you will do so bearing the image within you of Jesus Christ. For He is the one who comes down from the

² ¹⁵For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need. (Hebrews 4:15-16, KJV)

mountain and heals the tormented soul. He is the one who comes down from the mountain, walks on the sea, and calms the storm. He is the one whose determination to shelter you is so certain that it cannot be discouraged or intimidated at all, not even by the Cross looming ahead for him. And he is the one to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.