

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
3/6/2011, Transfiguration Sunday
Exodus 24:12-18, Matthew 17:1-9
There Are More with Us

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

²And [Jesus] was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his garments became white as light. (Matthew 17:2, RSV)

There is a wonderful story in the Sixth Chapter of Second Kings that lends me words to help express my theme in this sermon. The story concerns the prophet Elisha. That man was the disciple of one of the heroes in today's story of the Transfiguration of Our Lord. I mean Elijah. There he is, high up above our altarpiece, in our Transfiguration painting. He is there on the left, with Moses on the right, and Jesus in the middle. Elijah had a devoted disciple Elisha, who did great wonders in the land of Israel. This charming story I have in mind tells of one of Elisha's wonders.

It is a wartime story, but surprisingly gentle. It seems that the king of Aram, in the land of modern Syria, wanted to attack Israel at such and such a place. So, he and his officers made their plan. But their plan did not work because Elisha had forewarned the king of Israel, who then avoided the trap. So, the king of Aram planned another attack, but this one too was foiled by the counsel of Elisha. At first the king of Aram thought he was a victim of betrayal by one of his own officers, but he was told that, no, the problem was this prophet of the Lord, Elisha.

So, the King of Aram resolves to capture Elisha. He sends horses and chariots and a great army to seize the prophet. They come by night and surround the town where Elisha lives. Let me read aloud for you the conversation then between Elisha and his servant:

¹⁵When an attendant of the man of God rose early in the morning and went out, an army with horses and chariots was all around the city. His servant said, "Alas, master! What shall we do?" ¹⁶He replied, "Do not be afraid, for there are more with us than there are with them." ¹⁷Then Elisha prayed: "O LORD, please open his eyes that he may see." So the LORD opened the eyes of the servant, and he saw; the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha. (2 Kings 6:15-17, NRSV)

The story turns out to have a peaceful ending. Elisha asks the Lord to please strike the Arameans with blindness, which he does. Then Elisha comes among the Arameans, tells them that they are confused and at the wrong place, persuades them to come with him, and leads them to the King of Israel, where Elisha opens

the eyes of the blind Arameans. The King of Israel wonders whether he should kill the Arameans, but Elisha says, certainly not! Rather, Elisha counsels the king to hold a feast for the Arameans and then send them home. The story has this happy ending:

²³So [the king of Israel] prepared for them a great feast; after they ate and drank, he sent them on their way, and they went to their master. And the Arameans no longer came raiding into the land of Israel. (2 Kings 6:8-23, NRSV)

I bet you could pick out the words that I especially like and think relevant to our Gospel story. Here they are:

[Elisha] replied [to his attendant], “Do not be afraid, for there are more with us than there are with them.” (2 Kings 6:16, NRSV)

So it is with you and me and little Matthias, who is being baptized this Sunday. Indeed, so it is with all who bear the name of Christ: If only our eyes could be opened to the whole truth of things, we would see that “there are more with us than there are with them.”

The great thing about the story of the Transfiguration of Our Lord is that for a moment, our eyes are opened and we are permitted to see that there are more with Jesus than there are against him. Even if the awful forces of sin, death, and the devil should all come together and assail Jesus, they little know what lies before them. Aye, they are entirely overmatched by this single, good man. For one brief, shining moment, we see Jesus as he is, radiant as light, indeed, the only begotten Son of the Father, the very one we should listen to in this life.

When Peter, James, and John witness the Transfiguration of Our Lord, they are not looking on at just three ordinary fellows. Rather, they are seeing a small fraternity of holy men. Moses and Elijah were kindred spirits to Jesus -- each of them being walkers along the way of the Cross. They feared not to contend with kings -- Moses with Pharaoh, Elijah with Ahab, and Jesus with Pilate and behind him, this world's fierce tyrant, the Devil. They feared not the possibility of death, if only the people might live in faith. And so Elijah faced the four hundred and fifty prophets of Ba'al, along with the wrath of their protector, Queen Jezebel. As for Moses, that man was willing to surrender not only his life, but even his soul for the sake of the people, as we see in his great prayer of intercession for them:

But now, if thou wilt forgive their sin -- and if not, blot me, I pray thee, out of thy book which thou hast written.” (Exodus 32:32, RSV)

The way of the Cross: it is their subject on that Mount of Transfiguration. Another of the Evangelists, St. Luke, makes this clear:

And behold, two men talked with him, Moses and Elijah, ³¹who appeared in glory and spoke *of his departure*, which he was to accomplish at Jerusalem. (Luke 9:30, RSV)

Err long, Jesus will be off to Jerusalem, there to be arrested, abused, and crucified. Anyone with a speck of kindness in his or her heart will hardly be able to look at him then, as he suffers so. And his believers will be put in mind of the prophet Isaiah, who foretold of Jesus:

...he hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him. ³He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not. (Isaiah 53:2-3, KJV)

But now, in the story of the Transfiguration of Our Lord, we see the truth about Jesus: we see that his manner of life and his way of the Cross is the most beautiful thing this old world of ours has even seen.

One commentator¹ on the story of the Transfiguration of Our Lord uses the interesting image of a “diptych” to express the relationship between the Transfiguration of Our Lord and the Crucifixion of Our Lord. A “diptych” is a hinged collection of two surfaces or plates. For example, sometimes icons come in the form of diptychs, so that you have two related icons hinged together. Likewise, the story of the Transfiguration of Our Lord is linked to the story of the Crucifixion of our Lord, except that they are somehow reverse images, or rather, their coloring is very different. The idea is that if you could somehow superimpose one story on top the other, many of the lines would disappear, they are so similar, except for their coloring and their moods. The story of the Crucifixion is at one extreme of human experience, with suffering, mockery, abandonment, darkness, and death, with the Transfiguration at the other extreme, with light, glory, the fellowship of the holy prophets, and approval, indeed, the very voice of the heavenly Father:

⁵[Peter] was still speaking, when lo, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.” (Matthew 17:5, RSV)

Let me mention some of the parallels between the stories:

1) In both, Jesus is elevated, here on the mountain, there on the cross.

¹ Dale C. Allison, *The Lectionary Commentary. The Third Readings: The Gospels* (William B. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, MI, 2001), page 102.

- 2) Here there is light, indeed, the face of our Lord shone like the sun. There, there is darkness for three hours in the middle of the day.
- 3) Here, the garments of our Lord are illuminated. There, his garments are stripped off.
- 4) In both stories, Jesus is accompanied by two people: here, by the holy prophets, Moses and Elijah; there by the thief on the left and the thief on the right, dying on crosses along with Jesus.
- 5) Here Jesus is approved by the heavenly Father; there he is condemned by Pilate to crucifixion.
- 6) Here the three disciples fall down on their faces before Jesus in reverence of him. There, the soldiers strike him on the face, dress him in purple, and bow before him, mocking him.²

Altogether, it is as if today's story of the Transfiguration of Our Lord tells the *truth* about the story of his Crucifixion. The truth is that it is precisely in the suffering of our Lord that he is most glorious. What he did on that cross is the most beautiful of all deeds. It looks like defeat, but it is far-reaching victory. It looks like death, but it means life for you and for me and for as many as are willing.

Now, as we turn our thoughts toward the baptism of little Matthias Peter Bhasin, let us note that what Elisha of old said to his attendant is something we are able to repeat to Matthias. Indeed, we can repeat it to each of us:

¹⁶[Elisha] replied, "Do not be afraid, for there are more with us than there are with them."

This is quite literally so. "There are more with us than there are with them," because this same Jesus, who suffered on that cross, has risen from the dead and stands now at the side of Matthias and of you and me. We want this child to know it throughout his life. We ourselves need to know it, and I fear that we can scarcely take it in. That's why we need to hasten back to church every Sunday. We need to hear the blessed Gospel proclaimed to us that "there is more on our side," that He is on our side, and that therefore we can afford to venture forth into some brave deeds of goodness in his name.

When life strikes us blows and lays us low, we need to know that life is better than it looks, because "there are more on our side than on theirs." When we are assaulted by temptation, we need to remember that he who withstood every

² ¹⁶And the soldiers led him away into the hall, called Praetorium; and they call together the whole band. ¹⁷And they clothed him with purple, and platted a crown of thorns, and put it about his head, ¹⁸And began to salute him, Hail, King of the Jews! ¹⁹And they smote him on the head with a reed, and did spit upon him, and bowing their knees worshipped him. ²⁰And when they had mocked him, they took off the purple from him, and put his own clothes on him, and led him out to crucify him. (Mark 15:16-20, KJV)

temptation walks with us and would have us follow his example. And when sin, death, the devil, and the whole world would fill us with fear and argue that we cannot afford to be so good in this world, we need to be able to say, “Begone, all of you! You do not amount to a hill of beans compared to my Beautiful Savior, who stands at my side, and to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.