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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
3/2/2014, The Transfiguration of Our Lord  
Exodus 24:12-18, 2 Peter 1:16-21, Matthew 17:1-9  
A House of Transfiguration

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

<sup>2</sup>And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his garments became white as light. (Matthew 17:2, RSV)

Recently I attended a clergy meeting in which one of my colleagues - Rev. Peter Deebrach - was seeking advice on how to celebrate the 350th anniversary of his church — historical St. Matthew Lutheran Church, now in the Washington Heights section of Manhattan. St. Matthew's charter is dated December 6, 1664, which means that this is the 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary of that church. To European readers of this sermon, three hundred and fifty years might not seem like a long time. But here in America, that makes St. Matthew's Lutheran Church the oldest Lutheran church in our land, stretching back to Dutch and English colonial days.

One of the themes of our clergy discussion was that churches should want not simply to celebrate their past, but also be excited about their future.

This is our situation here at Immanuel Lutheran Church: We have had a great year celebrating our 150th anniversary. Now, let's be excited about our next one hundred and fifty years.

To do so, I think we would do well to remember a passage from Rev. Dr. Thomas Green's Transfiguration Sunday sermon one year ago now. Fr. Green said this:

You see, the transfiguration that took place on the holy mountain is far more than a onetime historic event. It is that, but for us it is far more. Immanuel Church is *a house of transfiguration*. It is a holy place in which God who is with us is at work transforming and transfiguring the members of the congregation who gather here on each Lord's Day and Holy Day.<sup>1</sup>

Let us remember Fr. Green's line: "Immanuel Church is a house of transfiguration." Let that be so for us for the next one hundred and fifty years, and in letting it be so, we will transfigure our own lives, one by one, and we will transfigure our dear city for the good.

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<sup>1</sup> From Rev. Dr. Thomas Nelson Green's 150th anniversary sermon here at Immanuel Lutheran Church, Manhattan, last Transfiguration Sunday, February 10, 2013

## THE BEAUTY OF THE CROSS

Why do you suppose Peter, James, and John were permitted *to see* the Transfiguration of our Lord? After all, the truth of what they saw had *already* been proclaimed on earth. The angel Gabriel had told Mary that her child will be none less than “the Son of God.” John the Baptist had heard the divine voice, “This is my beloved Son.” Even Simon Peter, shortly before climbing the holy mountain, had confessed that Jesus is divine:

Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the *Son of the living God.*” (Matthew 16:16, RSV)

So, the truth of what was declared on today’s Mount of Transfiguration is not entirely new. It has been revealed before.

Ahh, but the sight! The glorious sight! That was new. When Mary, for example, beheld her son, what did she see? A newborn babe lying in her arms. A young man working in his father’s carpentry shop. An innocent, but condemned man dying on a cross.

And what did John the Baptist behold? Something glorious, yes, but its glory was not the glory of Jesus. For that good man was permitted to see the opening of the heavens and the descent of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove. But that dove lighted on a man, an ordinary-looking man, wet from the water of the Jordan River.

And when Simon Peter declared Jesus to be the Messiah, the “Son of the living God,” again, he and the other disciples beheld an ordinary-looking man. Peter’s testimony was glorious, but what they beheld was ordinary.

Not so on the Mount of Transfiguration. Here Peter, James, and John are permitted another vision of Jesus. Let me put it this way: They are permitted to see the beauty and the dignity of the way of the Cross. They are permitted to see the radiance of Christ’s way of life. It is the beauty that really matters in this world, and it is a beauty available to you and to me too. Jesus can take an ordinary life and transfigure it into an extraordinary life, one that is most radiant in the eyes of heaven and eternity.

It’s not that they see a different man. It is *their* Jesus, the one who will continue his ministry and ere long will suffer and die in Jerusalem. Indeed, that is the subject of conversation with Moses and Elijah. As if they were servants of the Cross in advance, these two prophets had wrestled with their own powerful opponents – Moses with Pharaoh and Elijah with King Ahab. They had stood up for their faith, risking all, and had been true to the Lord. Now, they meet with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration to discuss his “departure,” as another of the evangelists puts it:

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

That is, Moses and Elijah discuss the way of the cross that lies ahead for this man who stands there so radiant before the three disciples. It is not another man the disciples see on the holy mountain, but their same Lord and master, heading toward suffering death. They behold the same man except with another aspect. The great thing about the Mount of Transfiguration is that Peter, James, and John are for a moment permitted to see their Jesus from the point of view of eternity. They are allowed to see the very truth of things.

## LUTHER

There is a wonderful passage in Martin Luther along these lines. He is writing about Mary the mother of our Lord. He imagines what would happen if the eyes of her neighbors were suddenly opened and they could see Mary as she really is. Luther says this:

Oh, how simple and pure a heart was hers, how strange a soul was this! What great things are hidden here under this lowly exterior! How many came in contact with her, talked, and ate and drank with her, who perhaps despised her and counted her but a common, poor, and simple village maiden, and who, had they known, would have fled from her in terror. (Martin Luther, *The Magnificat*, 1521)

That's because heaven measures things differently from the ordinary ways of earth. And sometimes, you and I can sense the difference. We simply know deep in our hearts that there is a justice and an evaluation of things that go beyond this world's ordinary reckoning.

In my years here in the city, for example, I have come to have special regard for the home health workers who permit many of the elderly of our city to remain in their own apartments. Some of these workers are getting older themselves. They drag their own weary bodies up the stairs of walk-up apartment buildings. They treat with kindness elderly folk who have sometimes slipped into forgetfulness and sometimes into suspicion, so that the worker again and again is accused of having stolen something that has not been stolen but has been misplaced or might have been lost years ago. They struggle to hear and to understand people whose voices might have become weak. They bear with the convictions of people who are old enough now that they "take no prisoners," no longer practice politeness, no longer care whether their opinions hurt other people. They clean the apartment, run the errands and bring home the change, sort out the medicines, talk with the doctors, change the kitty litter, keep company with the elderly person in their charge, laugh

with them, joke with them, and grieve for them when they have to leave the apartment that has been home for so long or when they die. Passersby pay the home health worker no mind, and yet “had they known, they would have fled from them in terror,” as Luther said. Why? Because they did not understand that they were in the presence of a most glorious person, highly honored in heaven, though disregarded here on earth.

And such glory is not reserved for the poor and humble of earth. Not at all. It can also belong to the CEO who quietly makes the decision that he or she shall not lead his firm in such-and-such a direction. He shall not go there! Millions upon millions of dollars might be at stake. But the CEO chooses the path of integrity. Bit by bit, that CEO might lose standing, might be thought of as not quite one of the “big boys.” He’s leveling off. He’s reached her height. Big things can no longer be pointed in her direction. And so, she no longer shines in the business world, though in the eyes of heaven she shines better than ever.

Or think of the school teacher who labors away faithfully year after year. He hopes he is reaching kids, she hopes she is really making a difference in the lives of young people. But there seems to be precious little sign of success. He presses on with his teaching, growing older, losing the chance for other career paths. The years pass and nothing special seems to be happening, except that in the eyes of heaven there is some real glory shining on earth, coming right from that ordinary classroom.

## **MORE BE WITH US**

There is a wonderful story about the prophet Elisha and his servant. I bet I have referred to this story before, it so much pleases me.<sup>2</sup> One morning Elisha’s servant awakens to find the town surrounded by enemies. They have been sent by the king of Syria to capture Elisha. A great host of horses and chariots surround Elisha’s city:

<sup>14</sup>So he [the king of Syria] sent there horses and chariots and a great army; and they came by night, and surrounded the city. <sup>15</sup>When the servant of the man of God rose early in the morning and went out, behold, an army with horses and chariots was round about the city. And the servant said, “Alas, my master! What shall we do?” <sup>16</sup>He said, “Fear not, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them.” (2 Kings 6:14-16, RSV)

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<sup>2</sup> The connection between the Transfiguration of our Lord and the story of Elisha, his servant, and the armies of the king of Syria is pointed out in Dale C. Allison in *The Lectionary Commentary: The Gospels*. Edited by Roger E. Van Harn. (William B. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2001), page 101-104

This is what Peter, James, and John need to know when they come down the Mount of Transfiguration and walk with Jesus toward Jerusalem and toward Golgotha. They need to know that “those who are with us are more than those who are with them.” On that holy mountain, they are permitted to see with their own eyes the truth of things. I bet that vision fortified them for the hard path ahead of them all.

## COMMENDATION OF THE DYING

One day, you and I will see things more clearly too. The final prayers refer to this in a most moving way. Life does not always work out that there is time for the final prayers. People die in various ways, sometimes suddenly, sometimes by accident, sometimes alone. Do not let it trouble you. Your Maker will be with you when you die, even if no one else can make it. But if there is time, it is nice if the pastor can be at the deathbed for the final prayers.

These prayers refer to something that is real, but which we cannot see now, and likely will not see until it comes our own time to die. I mean, the heavenly escort. Listen to the prayer:

☐ [Name], our brother/sister in the faith, we entrust you to God who created you. May your return to the one who formed us out of the dust of the earth. *Surrounded by the angels and triumphant saints, may Christ come to meet you as you go forth from this life...*

Many a quiet Christian has lived and died with little attention in this world. Yet at their death, the host of heaven came to escort them to their Savior Jesus himself. Onlookers see nothing special. But in heaven’s eyes, there is great glory. It is as if the dying Christian is arrayed in garments so white they dazzle beyond the radiance of sunshine.

## THE INEVITABLE TREND

It is the inevitable trend for the Christian that he or she should become more and more radiant in the eyes of heaven. That is, if we be true. If we bear the name of Christ with integrity and draw closer to him with ever more earnestness, then our lives will become transformed and transfigured, and this church shall be for us the gate of heaven and a “house of transfiguration,” as Fr. Green preached last year. This is because Jesus desires to dwell within us.

<sup>18</sup>I will not leave you desolate; I will come to you. <sup>19</sup>Yet a little while, and the world will see me no more, but you will see me; because I live, you will live also. <sup>20</sup>In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and *I in you...* If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my

Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. (John 14:18-23, RSV)

He who was radiant on the holy mountain will be no less radiant in your life and in mine. We need but let him have sway in us. Let his image rise up more and more in us. Let something of Christ himself be visible in this world because we let him lead our lives. Let us, then, blaze with the radiance of Christ in us, to the benefit of our neighbors and of ourselves and to the glory of the Transfigured One, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.