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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
2/7/2016, Transfiguration Sunday  
Luke 9:28-43a

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

<sup>38</sup>And behold, a man from the crowd cried, “Teacher, I beg you to look upon my son, for he is my only child; (Luke 9:38, RSV)

This is the kind of story that tugs on the heart of many of us. It is a story of a father’s love for his son. And it is story of human helplessness – helplessness, that is, until Jesus comes along.

Let this child represent someone dear to you. For me, the story leads me to think of our younger son, David. That is because I have not seen David for two years now. He is off in Vietnam, teaching. I have this strange sensation in my arms. It is a sensation of emptiness. I want to hold my son again. That is a ridiculous thought, I know, because David is too big for me. He is bigger than me. If I tried to hold him as I held him as a child, he would flop out all over the place. But at least I want to throw my arms around him again. That’s because I love him. And I have a feeling of helplessness about him in the sense that he is too far away. If he falls off his motor scooter in Hanoi, for example, I cannot rush to his aid. I cannot arrange for the doctors. I cannot arrange for the hospital. I can’t fix things! I can pray for him, which I do everyday. But I also feel rather helpless because this world of ours is big and complex and threatening in many ways, and we are not sure masters of things for the ones we love.

You have people in your life like that. So put that one in mind as you picture the plight of this father in this morning’s story. A demon has the child and tosses him around like a rag doll. The father sees the danger to his son. The father’s heart must break as he beholds the suffering of his son. He tells Jesus about it:

<sup>39</sup>and behold, a spirit seizes him, and he suddenly cries out; it convulses him till he foams, and shatters him, and will hardly leave him. (Luke 9:39, RSV)

A modern doctor might say that the child suffers from epilepsy. But the father and the Bible speak of the suffering of the boy in terms of an “unclean spirit” (Luke 9:42, RSV). And maybe the Bible’s way of putting it goes closer to the truth. It is not simply that the boy suffers from sickness. It does not do justice to this child’s suffering to calmly say, He is sick. It is not enough to describe misfiring electrical impulses in neurons. It is more along the lines that something demonic, something out-of-kilter, something wicked has gotten hold of the boy. This world just is not right in the depths of suffering that our loved ones

sometimes go through. We need not simply a physician, but the Great Physician. We need Someone who can break the grip of sin, death, and the devil, and all the misery this world endures. We need Jesus.

And so Jesus comes along. He descends from the Mount of Transfiguration. And when he descends, he does something truly glorious: he casts out a demon and saves the boy. Thus we come to a theme of Transfiguration Sunday: Jesus is just as beautiful down in the village contending with the devils as he is on top of the mountain with his dazzling white raiment and the company of the holy prophets.

The story of the Transfiguration of Our Lord is an interlude and kind of commentary in the story of the Cross. Before heading up that mountain – just a few verses before the story of the Transfiguration -- Jesus had spoken of the Cross to his disciples:

And he said to them all, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me.  
(Luke 9:23, RSV)

Now, in the story of the healing of the poor boy, Jesus has plunged back into the way of the Cross. He contends against the demons. He battles with them and accepts any suffering that comes from such a battle. Indeed, in the end, he will accept even a cruel death on the Cross. Transfiguration Sunday shows Jesus in the middle, between his preaching of the Cross to his disciples and his plunging back into the conflict with the demons. Transfiguration Sunday says that Jesus is continually beautiful, whether his beauty shines forth briefly on the holy mountain, or when he battles sin, death, and the devil on the plain. Or perhaps the point is better put this way: Jesus is beautiful on top of the mountain only because he is beautiful on his way of the Cross. It is the same with you and me. We are at our best when we are doing as Jesus bids us do: “Take up your cross daily and follow me.” On the way, we might look bruised and battered. But in heaven’s eyes, we shine with glory.

Now, let’s return to the father and his helplessness concerning his son. While Jesus and the three disciples were atop the mountain, the father seems to have asked the other disciples to heal his son. Those disciples had healed others. At the start of our Chapter 9, we read of the preaching and healing mission Jesus entrusted to his disciples:

<sup>1</sup>Then he called his twelve disciples together, and gave them power and authority over all devils, and to cure diseases.  
<sup>2</sup>And he sent them to preach the kingdom of God, and to heal the sick. (Luke 9:1-2, KJV)

They had had success in the past. This father hoped they would have success now. He knew that he could not heal his son. Perhaps he had tried the local physicians

and had trusted them until his money ran out. But they could not help either. He turns now to the disciples, only to find failure there too. How disappointed he must have been!

So it is sometimes with people we love: something seizes them and throws them to the ground, and we look on, doing what we can, but feeling rather helpless. Maybe it is some bitter illness, like cancer or MS. Or maybe it is an unwholesome inclination of spirit – a spirit of wild wrath that strikes out and hurts people, or a spirit of fierce addiction that exhausts the body and the will, or a spirit of self-indulgence that rushes headlong into poverty, or a spirit of haughtiness that leaves our loved one almost impervious to our pleas or our counsel, or a mysterious spirit of self-destruction, as if the person is bent on crushing every flower that grows, every bud that appears, and every good chance that comes along in life. You look on, heartbroken. This person you love is in the grip of some bad spirit. What happens to the boy in this morning's story is happening to this person you love: something is throwing him down to the ground, something is shattering her.

In our Gospel story, Jesus seems exasperated with his disciples. And in some measure, they could probably do better. I'll get to that in a moment. But for now I suggest that we can interpret the frustration of our Lord at the inability of his disciples to heal the boy as a deep and broad disturbance in the soul of Jesus at the suffering and misery that goes on in this world. Jesus is frustrated with the devil. Jesus is troubled at all the mischief that wrecks the souls of humanity. Jesus is distressed at the weakness of faith that leaves so much room for Satan to have a field day among us. And so Jesus cries out:

<sup>41</sup>Jesus answered, "O faithless and perverse generation, how long am I to be with you and bear with you?"

Then, having gotten that off his chest, Jesus immediately turns to saving the boy:

Bring your son here [Jesus says]. (Luke 9:41, RSV)

Perhaps we can take some encouragement in what happens next: the poor boy reaches a pitch of suffering. But this pitch does not mean that the boy is getting worse, but rather, that he is on the very edge of being saved. The Bible tells the story this way:

<sup>42</sup>While he was coming, the demon tore him and convulsed him. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, and healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. (Luke 9:42, RSV)

By God's grace, you and I or those we love and worry about might follow such a pattern too. Wrath might increase for a season, self-indulgence might enlarge, haughtiness might expand, self-destructive impulses might burn anew – but do not

despair: all of this is simply the storm before the calm – the breaking of the fever. The demon knows that he is on his way out. The demon knows that the Stronger One has come. The demon compresses all of his wickedness into a final storm and then is gone. The child is left whole and well and at peace.

Let me close by speaking of the way in which maybe the disciples could have done better in their ministry to the poor boy. This is about prayer. In our Monday Evening Bible class this past Monday, we noted that the Gospel of Luke is the Gospel of Prayer. It is characteristic of Luke to say, as he says in this morning's story, that Jesus did not simply ascend the holy mountain, but rather, Jesus ascended that mountain *in order to pray*. Jesus withdrew for prayer. That holy mountain was a retreat, for the sake of prayer:

[Jesus] took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain *to pray*. (Luke 9:28, RSV)

And it is like Luke to note that it was while Jesus was praying that this happened:

<sup>29</sup>And as he was praying, the appearance of his countenance was altered, and his raiment became dazzling white. (Luke 9:29, RSV)

In the King James translation of St. Matthew's version of this story, Jesus points to prayer as a key element in the story of the healing of the demon-troubled boy.

<sup>19</sup>Then came the disciples to Jesus apart, and said, Why could not we cast him out? <sup>20</sup>And Jesus said unto them, Because of your unbelief: for verily I say unto you, If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you. <sup>21</sup>Howbeit this kind goeth not out *but by prayer and fasting*. (Matthew 17:19-21, KJV)

Modern translations tend to leave out this last verse about prayer and fasting. The Revised Standard Version, for example, has a footnote about this verse: "Other ancient authorities insert verse 21: 'But this kind never comes out except by prayer and fasting.'"

However that might be, I believe that the reference to prayer and fasting is indeed in the spirit of St. Luke's Gospel. Jesus had been on top of the mountain praying. We do not know about the disciples at the foot of the mountain. They had been contending with the demon in the poor boy. They had dove into trying to heal the boy. Maybe they should have spent a bit more time in prayer and fasting before they took on that project.

“Prayer and fasting.” The season is now upon us. Prayer and fasting are two of the traditional disciplines of Lent. Before ascending that holy mountain, Jesus had instructed his disciples to take up their cross and follow him. Well, Lent reminds us that part of following Jesus is that we should recommit ourselves to prayer. The Psalms, for example, are available to us. We can read a Psalm each day of Lent and build a prayer for that day based upon the Psalm. In that way, we can head out into our day being more mindful of God.

Until heaven comes, the Christian life is always a Lenten life. It is always a life of prayer, almsgiving, repentance, and taking up our cross behind Jesus. But Transfiguration Sunday launches us into Lent with this thought: As Jesus was our Beautiful Savior on top of that mountain, so are we down here in the valley as we walk in his footsteps. To him be the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.