

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer  
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
The Midweek Liturgy, Wednesday, April 3, 2024  
Matthew 17:1-20  
The Transfiguration and the Epileptic Boy

HOLY GOSPEL ..... Matthew 17:1-20, RSV  
*Last week we read of Peter's great confession about Jesus, the passion prediction, and our Lord's call to self-denial and to carry our cross. Now we hear of our Lord's Transfiguration and the healing of the epileptic boy.*

<sup>1</sup>And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain apart. <sup>2</sup>And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his garments became white as light. <sup>3</sup>And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. <sup>4</sup>And Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is well that we are here; if you wish, I will make three booths here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah." <sup>5</sup>He 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." <sup>6</sup>When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces, and were filled with awe. <sup>7</sup>But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Rise, and have no fear." <sup>8</sup>And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only.



<sup>9</sup>And as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, "Tell no one the vision, until the Son of man is raised from the dead." <sup>10</sup>And the disciples asked him, "Then why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?" <sup>11</sup>He replied, "Elijah does come, and he is to restore all things; <sup>12</sup>but I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not know him, but did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of man will suffer at their hands."

<sup>13</sup>Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist.

<sup>14</sup>And when they came to the crowd, a man came up to him and kneeling before him said, <sup>15</sup>“Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is an epileptic and he suffers terribly; for often he falls into the fire, and often into the water. <sup>16</sup>And I brought him to your disciples, and they could not heal him.” <sup>17</sup>And Jesus answered, “O faithless and perverse generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him here to me.” <sup>18</sup>And Jesus rebuked him, and the demon came out of him, and the boy was cured instantly. <sup>19</sup>Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, “Why could we not cast it out?” <sup>20</sup>He said to them, “Because of your little faith. For truly, I say to you, if you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible to you.”

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

Let me begin this sermon with some historical context for our Lutheran Reformation. In particular, I would like to point out that the Lutheran Reformation and the Italian Renaissance happened at the same time. What a Golden Age! What an age of giants! Martin Luther (1483-1546), Raphael (1483-1520), Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519), and Michelangelo (1475-1564) all lived at the same time. In fact, Luther and Raphael were born in the same year, 1483.

Three of the four people I just mentioned lived full life spans — at least for back in those days. Luther lived to be 62, Leonardo da Vinci lived to be 67, and Michelangelo lived to be 88. But Raphael died young. He died at age 37.

The last major work of young Raphael’s life was his painting of the Transfiguration of our Lord. I have included a copy of that painting in our worship folder. It was the culmination of Raphael’s career. It is a masterpiece of art, but also I want to suggest that it is a masterpiece of theology.

The top half of Raphael’s painting is familiar to us here at Immanuel, because it is our Transfiguration painting high above our reredos. But we are missing the bottom half of that painting. The bottom half is called “the healing of the lunatic boy.” Nowadays, we would call him an “epileptic boy.” It is really sad to hear the father describe the effects of the epilepsy on his son:

<sup>15</sup>Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is an epileptic and he suffers terribly; for often he falls into the fire, and often into the water. (Matthew 17:15, RSV)

Our Transfiguration painting here at Immanuel misses the scene of the epileptic boy, and I regret that. I think that Raphael’s version is a profound

meditation on the meaning of the Transfiguration of our Lord. Raphael seems to think of these two scenes as a unity. It is as if Raphael is saying that there is no understanding the story of the Transfiguration of Jesus apart from the healing of the poor boy. And there is no understanding of the healing apart from the Transfiguration.

I think that putting the two halves of the painting together teaches us this lesson: The glory of Jesus revealed on the holy mountain is not something different from his healing of the epileptic boy. Rather, the holy mountain simply reveals the beauty of the ministry of Jesus down at the foot of the mountain. When Jesus heals the poor boy, he is no less glorious than when he is atop the mountain, dressed in garments as white as light and with his face shining like the sun. The momentary blessing atop the holy mountain is that the disciples were briefly permitted to see the beauty of the way of the cross — a beauty that will be fully revealed for us in heaven someday.

So, that is my theme about the unity we find in Raphael's painting. Our beautiful Savior is beautiful not only atop the holy mountain, but also down on the plain. So are we. When we follow the pattern of Jesus... when we take up our cross and follow him, we shine with a beauty that will be revealed to the whole universe in heaven.

Now, there is one line in the story of the epileptic boy that I find to be especially moving. It is the line about the inability of the disciples. The father is speaking to Jesus, and he says this:

<sup>15</sup>“Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is an epileptic and he suffers terribly; for often he falls into the fire, and often into the water. <sup>16</sup>And I brought him to your disciples, and they could not heal him.” (Matthew 17:15-16, RSV)

How many pastors over the course of our careers have sighed and said to ourselves, “I cannot do this. I cannot heal the lad.” Likewise with physicians. For all their knowledge and skill, sometimes they have to admit, “I cannot heal this person.” In this fallen world, we are all kin to the disciples. There are things we simply cannot accomplish. If our faith were stronger, I bet we could accomplish them. We have our Lord's promise about that. It is an extraordinary promise:

For truly, I say to you, if you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, “Move from here to there,” and it will move; and nothing will be impossible to you. (Matthew 17:20, RSV)

But for now, our faith is seldom as strong as it should be. For now, as St. Paul said,

For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face.  
Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I  
have been fully understood. (1 Corinthians 13:12, RSV)

But the happy thing about this story is that Jesus can do what the disciples cannot do. They were good and holy men — those disciples. But Jesus is greater! The disciples could not heal the poor boy, but Jesus heals him instantly.

I find this to be encouraging for all those who minister to others. I am thinking of pastors, physicians, nurses, attorneys, and counselors. But also I am thinking of parents at their wits end, close to despair about whether they will ever be able to help their children to be healthy or to get back on track. All we can do is the best we can. But there is hope beyond what *we* are able to do. There is hope beyond because there is Jesus, who can do what we are unable to do. And to him belongs the glory, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.