

**Sermon on 2. Peter 1:16-19 and Matthew 17:1-9**  
**by Pastor Alexander Mielke on February 20, 2008**  
**Martin Luther Church, 2379 Lake Shore Blvd West, Toronto**

2. Peter 1:16-19:

*16For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. 17For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." 18We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain. 19So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.*

Matthew 17:1-9:

*Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. 2And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. 3Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. 4Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." 5While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" 6When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. 7But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." 8And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. 9As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."*

Dear Congregation,

Friedrich von Bodelschwingh, the founder of the Diaconical Institutions in Bethel/West Germany, has once said: „It is impossible for a person to look towards

the sun, without his face being lit up by it.” This is what the Bible passage is about which we consider today. People have seen the sun, and their life has been made bright by it. To this they testify and they also invite us to do the same.

“Transfiguration“ is the important word to which the 2. Letter of Peter testifies. The disciples have experienced Jesu “Transfiguration“, and “Transfiguration” is their hope, as well as for us Christians. But what can that be – Transfiguration?

Let me tell you a personal experience. It was at the end of my studies in theology. My wife and I prepared for the exam in Wuppertal. We had an apartment above the day care centre of a Protestant congregation in Unterbarmen, where we liked to help out during that time. Every day, when we wanted to travel to the university, we walked over a large bridge, which arched across the railway station with its many train tracks. This was a noisy place, trains passed by continuously, besides, the cable cars screeched between an endless number of cars and busses. It rains often in Wuppertal, most of the time everything is grey in grey in this large city, especially in winter. But one morning the sun was just rising as I walked across the bridge. The sun sparkled brightly over the city and the railway station, and all the train tracks were flooded with golden light. Everything that was ordinarily just grey in grey was now especially beautiful, and this morning I began the workday with a smile.

For me, this was a moment when I experienced “Transfiguration”. Everything that was ordinarily just grey and uninteresting now shone forth in a new beauty, because it was touched by light. The light changed the city, and the light changed me, I began this day differently.

Transfiguration – the disciples have experienced something like it in Jesus too, yet here, it had a very different meaning again. “”We made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty.” I am very glad that there was not only the bestseller “The God Delusion” by Richard Dawkins on the book market last year, but also a very different book “Jesus of Nazareth” by Benedict XVI. In the German edition this book has a subtitle: “From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration”. And hereby, the Pope points to the two events in Jesu life, where his glory can be experienced. At these two

points, God's voice sounds from heaven: „ This is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased”. At these two points it becomes clear that Jesus was not just a wandering preacher, not only touched by the suffering of people and devoted to his service in healing and supporting the poor and hungry. But Jesus came to us as the Son of God, in him shines the glory of God. Here we experience what Benedict XVI. expresses in this way: “In his oneness with the Father, Jesus himself is light from light.” Let us, therefore, have a closer look at the paragraph from Matthew 17, which we have just heard as the Gospel Reading.

Jesus takes three disciples along to a high mountain, Peter, James and John, a threesome, which plays an outstanding role time and again, also in the Garden of Gethsemane for instance, and which will, later on, form a leadership body in the first congregation. The 2. Letter of Peter talks of the „holy mountain“, which they climb; according to tradition, this was the Tabor mountain, an impressive peak in the south Galilee mountain region, which is also assumed to be the place of the appearance of the resurrected , when he says in Matthew 28 “All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me”

There they experience Jesus in a heavenly appearance, side by side with Moses and Elijah. These are the two prominent figures of the Old Testament: Moses, who led Israel from Egypt and gave them God's law. Elijah, the first among the prophets, who called Israel back to God's way. Jesus is here side by side with the great figures of Israel, but Jesus is far more. Peter does not understand this at first. He wants to build three tents, and thereby give the same honour to all three. But God's voice from heaven makes it clear that Jesus is quite different from Moses and Elijah: “This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased.

Peter should have known it already or at least suspected it. For he really saw how Jesus is being transfigured, that his face shines like the sun, that his garments become white as light. What Jesus truly is, flashes forth at this moment, and that, in its might, it is hardly bearable for the disciples; in the Gospel of Mark it says: “They were exceedingly afraid”. Jesu glory as the Son of God, his power, beauty, wisdom, his glistening light, hardly bearable for human eyes, which is normally hidden under his earthly, human appearance. Benedict XVI. expresses it like this: “In his oneness with the Father Jesus himself is light from light. What he is in his

innermost, and what Peter attempts to say in his confession – this becomes, at this moment, also perceptible with the senses: Jesus being in the Light of God, he being light himself as the Son.” “They saw no one but Jesus only“, Jesus alone has this dignity, this glory, no other person, may he be even as important as Moses or Elijah.

Benedict XVI. points here to the close connection with the transfiguration of Jesus with the preceding paragraphs in the Gospel of Matthew. In chapter 16, Peter says the great confession for the first time: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God”. Then he is horrified, when Jesus talks of suffering, but Jesus emphasizes: “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” And we encounter the same here in chapter 17: “And as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them: Tell no one of the vision, until the Son of man is raised from the dead.” Peter would like to stay on the mountain, enjoy the gleaming light of Jesus and treasure the glory of this appearance. But Jesus forces them to go down the mountain, points to the tasks of daily life, prepares them for the suffering which they will have to endure. Benedict XVI. talks of the “inner interwovenness of cross and glory“; “the divinity of Jesus is one with the cross, only in this connection we truly recognize Jesus”. To experience the glory of Jesus, does not save us from suffering, but gives us the strength to bear it.

“Listen to him“ it says in Matthew 17. “You do well to pay attention to the prophetic word as to a lamp” it says in 2. Peter 1. The basis of our faith is the Word of God, not seeing. Often enough, our daily life is difficult and cumbersome. With Jesus, we are being led into suffering; his way is the way of the cross, which we shall not evade. Often enough, we see little of God’s shining light in our life. But we have the Word of God. On dark roads it also gives us strength, in difficult times it also gives us orientation.

The 2. Letter of Peter emphasizes: „For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ”. I have always felt this to be a powerful source of strength. The texts of the Bible are not just nice, beautiful, entertaining stories, which we enjoy, which, however, do not withstand the realities of daily life. No. The texts of the Bible are Words of

God. In them, God speaks to us in his power and authority. They are full of spiritual experiences and thereby, the most realistic in this world, for they proclaim God's reality as the origin of the whole world. In God's Word Jesus comes to us, we are no longer dependent on ourselves only, Jesus helps us with his presence and his promises.

And therefore in Jesus' transfiguration, our future, too, is made bright. I have to think back to an experience in the summer of 2006. As a family, we were on vacation in the south-west of France. We knew that it was a long way back, and got on our way at 4:00 o'clock in the night. And as I sat at the steering wheel of our Volkswagen bus and drove along the southern coast and the children slept behind me, I saw the morning star in the night sky in front of me. Large and powerful, the morning star gleamed, and I knew it would soon be morning. And before long, the sun began to rise, banishing the darkness of the night and bathed everything in a bright light.

In this service today, we have baptized two children. The two are already a bit grown up. For small children, in former times, it used to be a nice custom to dress them in pure white baptismal dresses. Perhaps you still have saved such baptismal dresses in your family. Here we can see something of garments becoming "white as light" on persons. It is a small sign that we also may experience this: that we shall become transfigured, because God's light will shine above and in us.

We may experience God's light in our life now already. But it is threatened by many things, sometimes we barely see it, it is a weak flicker. Our baptism is the promise, Christ's light has risen above our life, we may live with the hope for transfiguration of our life, for fulfillment of our life; that we, at the end of our life, shall fully stand in God's light; that we shall be cleansed and changed by the light, in God's eternal world, when Christ's light rises above us, penetrates and fills us. Baptism is the beginning of this hope in our life.

Let our faith be strengthened by this word from the 2. Letter of Peter: "You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts." Amen.