

**Sermon for the Transfiguration of Our Lord Jesus Christ,
August 6, 2020**

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

*Year A: 2 Peter 1:13–21; Psalm 99:5–9; Matthew 17:1–13**

Matthew's version of the Lord's Prayer, not Luke's shorter version, becomes the universal prayer of Christians. Early this morning, I noticed that Matthew's version of the Lord's Prayer is the gospel lesson for Mass on Tuesday in the First Week of Lent and on Thursday of the week following the Sunday closest to June 15—but never on a Sunday.

With the shut-down of the city in March, and the advent of live-streaming from Saint Mary's, Father Smith and I began to write out our weekday homilies. We haven't quit.

On Thursday, June 18, I read Ulrich Luz's commentary on the Lord's Prayer closely for the first time. Since then, his words on this prayer in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount have led me to read what he has written with a new perspective. He wrote: "the petitions of the . . . prayer are so short that seldom is one able to establish their meaning . . . it is the openness of the . . . prayer that is its real strength. Countless human beings have been able to find a

home in the Lord’s Prayer for their own hopes and petitions and to enter that home.”¹ He concludes that “the openness of this prayer is intentional.”² I think we can say the same thing about the stories of Jesus’ transfiguration, which both Matthew and Luke have taken and retold for their narrative purposes from Mark.³

Luz draws our attention to how the Greek word *μεταμορφώθη*—in English, metamorphosis—has been translated. The Greek word means “to change in a manner visible to others,”⁴ as in our expression, “You look radiant.” The Latin translation of the Greek gives us *transfigurari*, from which we get “transfiguration.” In English, Luz prefers to translate the Greek by saying, “his figure changed.”⁵ That said, I would add that the Greek verb here passive, his figure *was* changed—by God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

In the background of this story about Jesus is the story of Moses receiving the tablets of stone on which God

¹ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1–7: A Commentary*, trans. James E. Crouch, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2007), 314.

² Ibid.

³ Mark 9:2–10; Luke 9:28–36.

⁴ *A Greek-English Lexicon of New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (BDAG) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), s.v. “μεταμορφόω,” 639–40.

⁵ Luz, 393 n.1.

had written the commandments: “The LORD said to Moses, ‘Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tables of stone, with the law and the commandment’ . . . And Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. And Moses was on the mountain forty days and forty nights.”⁶

Matthew sets this story of transfiguration and proclamation of Jesus as “Son of God” between Jesus’ first and second predictions of his passion to his disciples.

So, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John “to a high mountain.” Jesus’ appearance, his body and his clothing, is changed. Moses and Elijah appear. The cloud descends. Peter starts to speak about huts, but the bright cloud overshadows them. God says, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.”⁷ This is the moment of revelation, of worship—falling on their faces—and conversion. Moses and Elijah are gone. Jesus says to his disciples, “Rise, and have no fear.”⁸ Before they come to the

⁶ Exodus 24:12–18.

⁷ Matthew 17:5.

⁸ Matthew 17:7.

other disciples, Jesus says, “Tell no one the vision, until the Son of man is risen from the dead.”⁹

Back to the Lord’s Prayer. Father, save us from the time of trial. Deliver us from evil. Help us know your dominion, your power, and your glory, in this and in the life of the world to come.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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⁹ Matthew 17:9. The RSV here translates *ἐγερθη* as “raised.” Translating it as “risen” parallels the translation in verse 7 of Jesus’ command, “*ἐγερθητε*,” “Rise.”