

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, February 15, 2026

The Last Sunday After The Epiphany
(Quinquagesima)

Festal Evensong

4:00 pm

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Prisca Lee-Pae

on

Matthew 17:9-23

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For a mustard seed is enough

Lent is about to begin. And before we step into that holy season, we are given a story not of spiritual triumph, but of frustration, failure, and sorrow.

In today's Gospel, the disciples come down from the mountain of glory. Just moments earlier, Peter, James, and John had seen Jesus transfigured—his face shining, his clothes dazzling, Moses and Elijah speaking with him. It was a moment of unmistakable divine glory. And yet, almost immediately, they encounter a painful human reality: a child tormented by seizures, a desperate father, and disciples who cannot heal him.

Between the glory on the mountain and the shadow of the cross, Jesus teaches his disciples about faith.

This is where we stand today—between Epiphany and Lent, between revelation and suffering, between light and shadow. It is a fitting place to ask: *What is our mindset as we enter Lent?*

Jesus explains the disciples' failure with unsettling clarity: "Because of your little faith." Then he adds words that have echoed through centuries of Christian reflection: *"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; nothing will be impossible for you."*

Last Sunday, Fr. Preston reflected on the smallness of salt. Today, Jesus draws our attention again to smallness—not the smallness of insufficiency, but the smallness that carries hidden power. The mustard seed was proverbially tiny, one of the smallest seeds people commonly knew. And mountains, in contrast, were among the largest, most immovable realities imaginable. As John Calvin observed, "moving mountains" was a Jewish hyperbole—a way of speaking about overcoming enormous obstacles. The point is not spectacle, but trust in God's sovereign power.

As human beings, we are endlessly preoccupied with measuring: large and small, much and little, strong and weak. Jesus interrupts that obsession. Faith, he says, does not need to be vast, impressive, or abundant. What matters is not quantity, but quality—not how much faith we possess, but whether it is real, living, and wholehearted.

This is the same Jesus who tells us that unless we become like little children, we cannot enter the kingdom of God. The same Jesus who sees two coins as an offering of immeasurable worth. The same Jesus who takes five loaves and two fish—clearly not “enough” by human calculation—and feeds five thousand. In the economy of God, smallness is never meaningless.

And yet, Jesus’ words leave us with a tension we cannot easily resolve.

On the one hand, *“faith as small as a mustard seed”* sounds hopeful. It suggests that faith is within reach of all of us. We do not need to be spiritual giants to follow Christ. But on the other hand, it can be deeply unsettling. We may find ourselves wondering, *“Do I not even have faith that small? Why does this mountain still stand?”*

So what kind of faith is Jesus speaking about?

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus speaks often—and pointedly—about faith. To the woman who had suffered bleeding for twelve years, he says, *“Daughter, your faith has made you well.”* To Jairus, whose daughter was believed to be dead, Jesus says, *“Do not be afraid; only believe.”* When a Roman centurion pleads for his servant and says, *“Only say the word, and my servant will be healed,”* Jesus marvels: *“I have not found such faith in Israel.”* In his hometown, he performs few miracles—not because of lack of power, but because of their lack of faith. To two blind men he says, *“According to your faith let it be done to you.”*

At the same time, Jesus repeatedly rebukes his own disciples with the phrase, *“O you of little faith.”* When they panic in a storm, he asks why they are afraid. When Peter begins to sink while walking on water, Jesus asks, *“Why did you doubt?”* When they worry about having no bread, he asks why they do not trust.

From these stories, we can learn several things about the faith Jesus speaks of.

First, we learn that true faith is a faith that heals, saves, and makes whole. Little faith is not about size, but about direction. It is faith that looks more at the danger than at God, more at the storm than at Christ in the boat. Weak faith sees the problem as larger than God.

Second, Jesus makes clear that it is not our power that heals, casts out demons, or feeds the multitudes—it is God’s power alone. And yet, mysteriously, God chooses not to exercise that power apart from human faith. God desires communion, not control. God chooses to work through us, to make us agents of God’s grace, to let divine power flow through human trust.

Third, Jesus insists that faith need not be great. A mustard seed is enough. Perhaps this is divine wisdom meant to guard us on both sides—preventing pride in those who believe they have “strong faith,” and discouragement in those who fear they have none. A grain of mustard seed keeps the faithful humble and the doubtful hopeful.

Fourth, we must notice something deeply challenging: those most often rebuked for little faith are the disciples themselves—the insiders, the religiously privileged, the ones closest to Jesus. And those praised for their faith are often the outsiders: Gentiles, women, the sick, the disabled, those labeled as sinners. Being a disciple, being a Christian, does not place us above others. It places us under the same call to trust.

Confronted with the disciples’ failure and a father’s desperate hope, Jesus laments, ‘You faithless and twisted generation.’ It is a hard word. And it invites us to reflect honestly on our own time. With all our accumulated knowledge, our advanced technologies, and our remarkable medical achievements, trusting

God does not necessarily come more easily. In fact, we are often tempted to trust human power more than divine mercy.

The ashes we will soon receive on Ash Wednesday remind us who we are: dust, and to dust we shall return. No amount of progress changes that truth. Lent calls us back to humility, dependence, and trust.

When Jesus predicts his Passion for the second time, the disciples are filled with grief. But we know what they do not yet fully understand—that sorrow will not have the last word. Through suffering and loss, they will be transformed. Their faith, once little and fragile, will grow—not into pride, but into courage. And from that transformed faith, the Church will be born.

So as we stand on the threshold of Lent, we might ask: *What mountain lies before us?* What obstacle, what fear, what suffering, what calling seems immovable?

Perhaps the mountain Jesus speaks of is not something to be removed, but a path to be walked—the way of the cross. Through this Lenten season, may we follow Jesus step by step. And may our faith, however small it feels, be real enough, living enough, and wholehearted enough for God to move through us. For a mustard seed is enough.
