

Sermon – Matthew 17:1-9  
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Transfiguration – Year A  
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“Fire on the Mountain”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. As you may have noticed, superheroes are a big deal these days. Just last year, *Avengers: Endgame* became the highest grossing movie in history at the worldwide box office while Joaquin Phoenix took home an Academy Award for his portrayal of the Joker. These characters have infiltrated our home, too, through storybooks and movies. Part of the charm of these stories for children, and perhaps adults, too, is that the heroes usually have dual identities – one who wears tightly-fitting spandex while fighting bad guys, the other who maintains a normal life. The tension in the story often involves the interplay between secrecy and revelation, but the plot is usually simple enough. The everyday person sees evil unfolding, quickly throws on a mask and a cape, and joins the fray without anyone learning who they are. Just this week, I overheard Erika reading a book about Batgirl to Torsten, and I learned what the other characters in the book seemed not to know: Her real identity is Barbara Gordon. I’m sorry if I just ruined spoiled the Batgirl storyline for you; my bad. Anyway, the secret identity trope predates modern comic books, of course, with ample examples in mythology and literature. Why? Well, it makes for good storytelling. But there’s more to it than that, I think. Perhaps we like to imagine ordinary people being more; perhaps we ourselves yearn to become extraordinary.
2. It is through this lens that we might misread the Transfiguration and, perhaps, Jesus himself. On the surface, what seems to be happening today is

that Jesus, having kept his identity secret thus far, takes his closest friends up the mountain so that they can see a heavenly light show and get a glimpse of who he really is. And what a glorious scene it is! Dazzling light, a radiant face, Moses and Elijah and a voice from heaven, too. We might make the mistake of thinking that Jesus is telling Peter, James, and John who he *really* is. Sure, he normally looks like mild mannered, everyday Jesus of Nazareth, but he's really Jesus the Super Christ. And goodness, doesn't that sound good? A dazzling hero come to put the forces of evil to rout. Bam! Pow! Bamf! Is this what's happening?

3. Robert Farrar Capon writes: "The true paradigm of the ordinary American view of Jesus is Superman: 'Faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, able to leap tall buildings in a single bound! It's Superman! Strange visitor from another planet who came to earth with powers and abilities far beyond those of mortal men, and who, disguised as Clark Kent, mild-mannered reporter for a great metropolitan newspaper, fights a never-ending battle for truth, justice, and the American way.' If that isn't popular Christology," Capon continues, "I'll eat my hat. Jesus – gentle, meek and mild, but with secret, souped-up, more-than-human insides – bumbles around for thirty-three years, nearly gets himself done in for good by the Kryptonite Kross, but at the last minute, struggles into the phone booth of the Empty Tome, changes into his Easter suit and with a single bound, leaps back up to the planet Heaven."
  
4. I think Father Capon hits the nail on the head here. We love heroes who are more than they appear, who almost lose but always triumph. To get a Jesus like this, however, we have to ignore the Jesus we find in scripture. Jesus was transfigured not to show his friends a cape beneath a carpenter's robe but for entirely different purposes. A clue lies in three words that were lopped off the beginning of Matthew 17: "Six days later." That's when Jesus went up the mountain. Six days later than what, you ask? After Peter's confession that

Jesus was the Messiah, and after Jesus telling Peter and the others what being the true Messiah meant: that Jesus would go to Jerusalem, be killed and then raised. Peter wants nothing to do with this; Peter wants a superhero. But that's not what the world needs. Shortly after the Transfiguration, Jesus is at it again, talking about betrayal and death. Not near death, or almost death, or something that looked like death. Just death. And at the end of our passage today, we hear Jesus telling his friends not to tell anyone what they had seen up on the mountain. Why?

5. Jesus does want to be seen as the dazzling God-man who happens to die on the cross but is raised again. In the mission of the Messiah, the cross is not accidental. It is the whole thing. Yes, the Transfiguration informs our understanding who was crucified, but it is his passion and death that define who Jesus is and what he came to do. Jesus, God's Son, has not taken on human flesh and mortality as a disguise. He has actually taken on our living and our dying and everything else that comes with being human – this is his true identity. The Transfiguration shines forth the dazzling truth that this everyday Jesus is also God. Neither identity is hiding the other. The only hiding Jesus is doing is the “in plain sight” sort. This Jesus, on the mountaintop and in the valley, in the manger and on the cross, in the bread and in the wine, is both God and human. And this Jesus has come not to avoid suffering and death; he has come to suffer and die. The dazzling light of God will be nailed to a tree. For you and for me. That is the true revelation of God's glory, that Jesus would show how endless is God's capacity to love and forgive. Yes, I am God's Son, he says. Yes, Moses and Elijah point to me. Yes, I am the truth to be found on mountaintops. But you want to see the full revelation of who I am? Follow me to Jerusalem and watch me die for you.
6. We do not need a God who flashes forth fire on mountaintops or, at least, not a God who does only that. We need the dazzling God who has become one of us. Who goes back down the mountain and invites us to follow. Who

descends all the way into death and hell so that death and hell would lose their grip on us. We need the Jesus who comes into our broken relationships and gives us a glimmer of God's life and love. We need the Jesus who can help spouses forgive one another, who shimmers with a glimmer of hope between estranged parents and children. We need the Jesus who sits with us when our loved ones are hospitalized, who stands with us at the graveside when we commit them to the earth. We need the Jesus who brings God's brightness into the darkest moments of our life, for this is a God who can redeem us, save us. We will not often make it up into the mountain's fire. I don't blame Peter for wanting to set up camp and remain up there. Goodness knows I'd love to see some more dazzling glory in this world. But no matter, the fire descends, lights up our darkness from within.

7. Follow me down the mountain, Jesus says, and I will transfigure you, lighting up your darkness and bringing life out of death. He is, as the poet Malcolm Guite writes, "The Love that dances at the heart of things/Shone out upon us from a human face/And to that light the light in us leaped up,/We felt it quicken somewhere deep within,/A sudden blaze of long-extinguished hope." As we prepare to enter Lent, these forty days of repentance and remembrance of all that God has done for us, we do not journey alone. Jesus comes with us, not as God hidden in humanity, or a human subsumed in divinity, but just as he is, the shining light in our darkness who was willing to let his light burn out so that we would live. We enter Lent and go to Jerusalem to behold again his cross, for it is in the extinguishing of his light and life that the glory of God is shines most clearly. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.