

POWER UP

SHERARD EDINGTON

Matthew 17:1-8

We live in an age of superheroes. Or so it would seem judging from all the current movies and television shows about people with fantastic powers and ability. Superheroes, it seems, are everywhere.

These superheroes, of course, are the comic book villains and heroes that I knew as a kid. Today, the visual technology exists to believably portray their abilities on the screen. It is certainly better now than it was in the Superman TV show of the late forties when George Reeves would “take off” by quite obviously jumping onto a trampoline. In 1978, when the first modern Superman movie with Christopher Reeves (no relation to George Reeves) was released, it was given the marketing tagline, “You’ll believe a man can fly.” And I did.

Today, both the big screen and the small screen are wall-to-wall with such characters as Superman, Batman, Spiderman, Wonder Woman, the Hulk, Iron Man, and dozens more. These beings tickle our imaginations and make us wonder, what is it like to have superpowers—to fly, to be strong, to be invisible, to be fast.

In the wake of all these fictional superheroes buzzing about, there is yet another television about superheroes, but this one takes a different approach. The show is called *Powerless*. It is a light, goofy comedy and it centers on the regular people who have no powers yet live in a world inundated by super people. The show asks the question “what is it like for regular people to live around superheroes?” My daughter and I, out of curiosity, watched the first episode. (We won’t be watching it again.) But the question the show wrestles with is interesting—When superheroes and supervillains slug it out in the skies over your city, there will be collateral damage—buildings, homes, cars, even people. How do regular people live in this environment? What does it mean to be powerful? What does it mean to be powerless?

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Today is Transfiguration Sunday. It is the last Sunday of the season of Epiphany and the last Sunday before Lent. That’s right, Lent begins this week. Tuesday will be Mardi Gras and the day following is Ash Wednesday.

Our reading for today begins by telling us that Jesus leads Peter, James, and John alone up a high mountain. For anyone familiar with scripture, this would remind them of Abraham leading Isaac up the mountain, or maybe Moses leading Joshua up Mt. Sinai to meet God.

When they reach the top, Jesus changes, he is transformed, he is transfigured. Jesus' face *shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzlingly white*. Again, students of scripture know that these are signs of God's presence. As if that wasn't enough, he is joined by Moses and Elijah—two heroes of ancient days. And they are speaking together.

Once again, for those familiar with scripture (and Matthew's congregation would have been), this is an amazing moment—Jesus joins the pantheon of Israel's great heroes. Moses represents the Law and Elijah represents the prophets.

Peter observes this scene and offers his infamous suggestion: *Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings herel, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah*. We don't know what Peter had in mind with this plan. Possibly he wanted to memorialize the moment for the world, to create a religious museum for all to visit, a mountaintop tabernacle. However, before anything can be done, a bright cloud appears and voice from the cloud declares, *This is my son, the beloved, with him I am well pleased; listen to him*. Peter, James, and John throw themselves to the ground in fear, but Jesus goes to them, touches them reassuringly, and tells them, *Get up and do not be afraid*. The disciples lift their heads and realize that they are once again alone with Jesus.

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The disciples (and those who have been in Jesus' presence) have to this point experienced Jesus as a healer, as a teacher, even as a prophet. But it doesn't appear that they have put the pieces together. Yes, Peter has just confessed that Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus asked him, *Who do people say that I am?* and Peter answered, *You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God*.

But then Jesus tells of the suffering that is waiting for him in Jerusalem and Peter pulls him aside and says, *God forbid it, Lord. This must never happen to you*. But it must happen and Jesus reprimands Peter saying, *Get behind me, Satan. You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things*. Peter, despite his privileged position is unable to recognize the divine power in Jesus. Peter's humanity limits his ability to comprehend what is before him. It takes the mountaintop experience of the Transfiguration for Peter to fully visualize the holy in Jesus, to see Jesus as one with power, the power to heal, the power to save, the power of creation itself.

This power is not limited to Jesus. This power is shared. It is shared with us when God claims us in baptism. It is shared with us through the Holy Spirit. It is shared with us when Jesus empowers his disciples to go out into the world. This is God's power, not human power. It is not a coercive power, it is a loving power.

There are many good people in the world doing good things to help others. But as Christians, we are different. We have been set apart, blessed with power to do not just good things, but God things.

- We feed the hungry not just that their stomachs might be filled but that they might enjoy the kingdom of heaven.
- We shelter the homeless not just to keep them safe but so that they might experience God's love for them.
- We befriended the forgotten not just to alleviate their loneliness but that they might find the hope of new life.

We don't live in a world where superheroes are flying around across the sky and stopping runaway locomotives, but we do live in a world where God's power is available to those who believe and seek God's kingdom

There are so many instances of people demonstrating God's power. Allow me to share a few with you.

- There are the Presbyterians who founded a worshipping community in a poor neighborhood in New Orleans based around a community garden. Among other things, their community assists the neighbors in growing food and serving meals.¹
- There is the Presbyterian church in Albany, Georgia, that partnered with Habitat for Humanity to rehab an abandoned house in their neighborhood so a family might have a home.²
- There is Leisa Wagstaff, a Presbyterian mission co-worker, who has served in five African countries for 30 years and who is currently serving in South Sudan. She says: "People often ask me in which capacities I have served. I respond: strengthening communities as they seek to provide education; training pastors, lay leaders and primary school teachers; administering schools and curriculums; training youth workers; coaching gymnastics, and so on. I believe my most important work to be the sharing of self—shortcomings included—and the ministry of presence as I walk with the host community at their pace through the challenges of having been born in places where people have not been allowed to reach their fullest potential."³
- There is the small Presbyterian church up the road in Lebanon, Kentucky, that held a community prayer service earlier this month in response to the

¹ <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/okra-abbey-cultivating-community-new-orleans-pigeon-town-neighborhood/>

² <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/not-quite-right-drains-toilets-truth-christmas/>

³ <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/god-give-faith-go/>

government's recent order on refugees and immigration. The church usually sees about 30 people in worship on Sundays but for the Friday-night prayer service they had close to 90 people from across their community. The pastor of the church said that the congregation was wrestling "with what it means to speak out publicly when we do have Christian convictions about caring for the least of these."⁴

I challenge you to power up—to accept and embrace the powers that God has placed on you. Whether it is the power of God's spirit, the power of the Holy Spirit like that which fell on the people at Pentecost, or the power that Jesus gave his disciples, you have been empowered to be God's agents of change, to open the door to God's kingdom, to be super. Go out into the world, as you go, may your face shine.

And for this we can be truly thankful. Amen.

⁴ <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/rural-kentucky-congregation-opens-doors-community-prayer-service/>