

Sermon for the Transfiguration of our Lord, Year A

The Text: Matthew 17:1-9

Super strength

Everyone here, I am sure, has heard of Superman. Maybe you don't know too much about him and have never been a fan of this comic book character but you know that he has super human strength, is "faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive and able leap tall buildings in a single bound" – to use the opening words of the old TV series. There are some very interesting facts behind this comic book character.

The character was first created in 1933 by a shy, spectacled Jewish teenager who fretted about his lack of popularity. Convinced that some miracle could transform him from a nerd to a hunk, he vented his frustration by writing comic strip scenarios. He showed them to his best friend, who drew characters and scenes to accompany the story line. The two boys, Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster, created a superhuman extra-terrestrial disguised as a clumsy reporter named Clark Kent. In June 1938 the first Superman comic book appeared.

Whether this was deliberate or not there are strong biblical overtones in the Superman story. Like the way Superman comes to earth from another planet as a baby, is rescued from the capsule that brought him here, is adopted by strangers and grows up to confront evil and rescue those in distress. That is so much like the stories of Moses we find in the Bible.

There are also messianic overtones. Kal-El (Superman's real name), the only son of Jor-El, is sent to a world in need of salvation. (El is Hebrew word for God).

Superman's father says, *"Even though you've been raised as a human being you're not one of them. ... They lack the light to show the way. For this reason above all ... I have sent them you . . . my only son (From Superman Returns)*. He arrives on a farm in a star-shaped container. People tell him they don't need a saviour, but he knows full well that they really do.

Superman is, of course, not real. He is an imaginary character but one who isn't totally irrelevant to this day and age. Kids pretend to be able to fly like Superman and run around the house with hands above their heads making a whooshing sound. Even as adults we would all like to have the strength and courage of the 'Man of Steel' for those times when things get out of control. When our problems are bigger than our ability to handle them, it would be great if we could have the strength and power to overcome them.

What are some of the things that throw us off balance?

Disappointment, disagreement, discontent, disillusionment, distress, disunity, discouragement, discomfort, disenchantment, disability, disgruntlement, disloyalty, dissatisfaction, disapproval, disquiet, disharmony, disobedience, discrimination, disasters, disorientation, disputes, dissent, distrust, distraction, disingenuousness (there's one to look up) and whatever other word that starts with "d" that describes what causes you to be "down in the dumps".

What can be done when we are just worn out and tired from life's hassles? What can be done when the pressures and the worries get the better of us and there is no joy anymore?

This week we will enter the Lenten season but before we head for Jerusalem for the events of Good Friday and Easter we travel with Jesus to the top of a mountain. Jesus withdraws from the noise and busyness of everyday life before heading off into the events that would lead to his death.

Jesus knows that the days which lay ahead will be filled with every trial known to human beings. Put yourself in the same situation as Jesus, knowing full well what horrors are soon to happen. Knowing what terrible pain and suffering is to come would weaken the bravest heart. It is true Jesus is a special person; nevertheless he experienced all the emotions and misgivings that we experience.

And so Jesus goes to the top of a mountain to be with his heavenly Father. He spends the time in prayer. It is interesting to note that every time Jesus is confronted with a difficulty or personal struggle he first goes to God in prayer. And here again he goes to God for strength for his mission.

And while Jesus is there on the mountaintop, away from the noise and hubbub of the rest of the world, he meets with Moses and Elijah. This meeting has on its agenda what will happen to Jesus when he goes to Jerusalem. They talked of his dying and rising (Luke 9:31). They encourage Jesus, reminding him of God's plan of salvation and how the events about to take place are a fulfilment of all that is spoken about in the Law and the Prophets. Maybe this was God's way of keeping in perspective the suffering Jesus was about to endure – yes, it will be horrible but it will bring untold blessing to sinners all over the planet.

Then comes the cloud, a sign of God's presence. And from the cloud a voice speaks, *"This is my Son, whom I have chosen"*. "This is my Son whom I love and whom I have sent to be the saviour of the world". With this reassurance of love and the encouragement of Moses and Elijah, Jesus continues his journey to Jerusalem. For Jesus, Jerusalem meant suffering.

Maybe you have your own personal "Jerusalem"—those times when the events and upsets, the pressures and spiritual struggles that leave you wondering how you will ever cope?

Your Jerusalem might include a doctor's comment, "There's something I need to tell you about the results of your tests". Your Jerusalem might be that phone call that announces the sudden death of someone close.

Your Jerusalem might be a troubled relationship. You want things to be different between you and that other person but it just isn't happening.

Your Jerusalem might be the disappointment you feel when your dreams and plans fall into a heap.

Your Jerusalem might be difficult people whom you have to deal with. You do your best but in the end there is someone who finds fault and cuts away any confidence which you had.

Your own personal *Jerusalem* may be your discipleship. Jesus calls us to deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow him. This is a call by Jesus to be disciples who are willing to make sacrifices when it comes to following Jesus or reaching out to help and get alongside of someone in need, or giving of our best in our workplace.

Sacrifice is not a popular concept these days. We are so used to asserting our rights and getting what we want that sacrifice is a really difficult thing?

We struggle to sacrifice just a little of our time to worship God with our fellow Christians or talk with him daily.

We know that God calls us to show love, patience, forgiveness and understanding but we find it hard to sacrifice our own needs and wants for the sake of the benefit of someone else.

We know that discipleship calls us to put Christ first in our lives and be committed to him just as he is committed to us but somehow we manage to get side tracked by all kinds of trivia. We want to be true disciples but we feel so inadequate. This is our *Jerusalem*.

When it came to facing Jerusalem, what did Jesus do? He withdrew for a while into the presence of God and was reassured and strengthened for his mission. That's where we will find forgiveness, strength and assurance – in the presence of God.

Maybe you have resisted getting close to God and kept him at an arm's length?

Maybe you know about the death and resurrection of Jesus as interesting facts but never taken in that he did it for you and really trusted his love for you?

Maybe you have never really thought of God as right here, right now, available, ready to help, willing to strengthen and support you?

Maybe you have floundered under the weight of trouble but have never taken seriously the promises of God? Promises like: "*Do not be afraid—I am with you! I am your God—let nothing terrify you! I will make you strong and help you; I will protect you and save*

you" (*Isaiah 41:10, TEV*). The almighty and all powerful God of the universe is making that promise to you personally. That's fantastic!!

Our God is a God who stands by his people and gives them the strength to cope with whatever crops up along life's journey. Our God is a God who has demonstrated his love for us on the cross and he is not about to abandon us now or any time in the future. Jesus died a horrible death because of his love for each of us. That's how much God cares for us. It is confidence in God's love for us that led the psalmist to say: *"Even if I go through the deepest darkness, I will not be afraid, Lord, for you are with me. Your shepherd's rod and staff protect me"* (*Psalm 23:4, TEV*).

And again, Psalm 40:11–12a (*TEV*)

¹¹ LORD, I know you will never stop being merciful to me. Your love and loyalty will always keep me safe. ¹² I am surrounded by many troubles— too many to count!

It's amazing how positive the apostle Paul could be in the face of trouble. He explains it like this, *"I have learned this secret, so that anywhere, at any time, I am content, whether I am full or hungry, whether I have too much or too little. I have the strength to face all conditions by the power that Christ gives me"* (*Philippians 4:12b,13*).

We too know that, come what may, God's presence and power enables us to rise above whatever it is that is getting us down.

When everything dictates that you "call it quits", "give up" "throw in the towel" you are able to say with the psalmist, *"I trust your love"* (*Psalm 13:4 CEV*). The cross is a symbol of the love that God has for you.

From under the shadow of the cross you are certain that your sins are forgiven and death has been defeated. Even if the worst should happen, you are at peace, certain of God's loving hands which surround you.

In the shade of the cross you receive life giving food and drink, the body and blood of Jesus which encourages and sustains you through every trial to the point where you are able to say, *"With God on my side, what trouble can really hurt me? Nothing in all creation is able to separate me from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord"* (*Romans 8:39*).

In the shade of the cross you can take time out and take to God that which is bugging you and be reassured and strengthened.

In the shade of the cross you go about your work and relationships ready to boldly share the love that Christ has shown to you in whatever way you can.

Superman is just make believe, but you have super powers at your disposal. You are super men and super women because you can say, *"Christ gives me the strength to face anything"* (*Phil 4:13 CEV*).

And may the peace of God, which surpasses all human understanding, guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.