

“The after glow”

- One thing I have come to enjoy greatly is movies about comic books and super heroes ¹
 - Maybe it is just me, but lately there seems to be a lot of them, and they just keep on making sequels
 - There are the Spiderman movies (6 of them), Hulk and the Avengers, Fantastic Four, you got the X-men and their 10 movies
 - I never read comic books, and still don't, but I do enjoy a good action movie and they can provide some of the best ones
 - At this point in reading the sermon, my editor in chief, Katy, turns to me and says, “you know, these movies came out a long time ago”
 - To which I replied, “Don't forget that we are the same age.”
 - So Gaius helped me with a newer reference: apparently there is a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle reboot on Netflix this days, and apparently it is also good.
 - While it is not universally true with these characters, comic book super heroes of a certain era usually started out in some connection to radiation
 - Radioactive spiders for spider man
 - Radiation machine gone wrong for the Hulk
 - A radioactive cloud for the fantastic four
 - Mysterious sewer goo for the turtles
 - These characters would glow that nice green color, and they would slowly discover they had been changed into something new
 - Their DNA- or their very essence- was altered by this mysterious form of energy that we new so little about

¹ <http://goodcomics.comicbookresources.com/2011/03/16/committed-my-favorite-radiation-induced-superheroes/>

- Fun fact- this era of radioactive-enabled super heroes, it was speculated by Wired magazine ², was spawned by a magazine article in 1953
 - The magazine was Mechanix Illustrated, and the title of that article was "How Nuclear Radiation Can Change Our Race."
- The mystery of how radiation was going to affect us, combined with the fear of the nuclear arms race and duck and cover drills, allowed our imaginations to run wild.
- Thus the advent of these characters.
- I suppose by now you know me well enough to figure out where I am going with this today
- The child inside of me could not resist combining this, and the Transfiguration
- Seeing Jesus glowing before the disciples as in one of these movies or comic books
- Leaving him and everyone in the vicinity altered somehow by the mysterious glow radiating off of him
- Please do not take this the wrong way- I am not dismissing what has become a major feast in the church by comparing it to comic books
- Quite the opposite: after all of the impact these movies and comics have had on our culture
 - One can only take the Transfiguration more seriously.
 - Maybe in some way the Transfiguration was inspiration for these authors
- And comparing it to the radiation in these stories might just give us a better idea of what all three synoptic gospels are trying to tell us here
 - Are trying to illustrate what happened on that mountain top that day
- This scene from Jesus' life is located in the middle of the Gospel of Mark
 - Here, it is meant to be a pivotal point in the story; a peak in the plot arc
 - And how appropriate for us on this Sunday, the last Sunday of Epiphany and the one immediately before Ash Wednesday
 - We began this season with Jesus' baptism, hearing the voice from heaven: "This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased."
 - The text for this one is ambiguous- we are left wondering if anyone other than Jesus has actually heard this voice.
 - Mark seems to start quiet and crescendos as he goes along

² http://www.wired.com/magazine/2011/03/pl_prototype_radiation/

- Because here, bookending the whole season, is another voice from heaven telling the disciples to listen to him
- And for this one there is no doubt it was heard by all present. ³
- For a fleeting moment, the three disciples are able to see past the veil that blinds in this world, and see Jesus for who he really is
- He is clothed in dazzling white- whiter than bleach the author assures us, this is something unnatural, or supernatural
- The very energy present in creation was here again in this moment- shining as brightly as the newly created sun in Genesis ⁴
- And the disciples are left speechless, or babbling something about building three dwelling places and never leaving again
- In all three synoptic gospels, Jesus is seen walking and talking with two people: Moses and Elijah
 - There are some very specific things the gospel authors want us to know about this experience
 - More than simply who Jesus is- Jesus is now connected and is part of an ongoing work of God
 - Both of these prophets were central to Israel's understanding of God's salvation
 - These prophets both parted water and walked on dry ground. ⁵
 - Water has always been associated, both for Israelites and for us today, with God's redeeming work in the world
 - And in particular God's overcoming of the chaos represented by water
 - It was Moses' parting of the Red Sea that brought the Israelites to salvation and the Promised Land
 - Died on a *mountaintop* with only God as a witness, and God buries him in a secret location
 - Elijah parted the waters so he could walk across and continue his journey with Elisha
 - Not long after, on the *mountaintop*, God called Elijah up into heaven, bypassing death and ascending in a chariot of fire

³ PulpitFiction, Last Epiphany 2018, <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/transfigurationb>

⁴ <http://processandfaith.org/resources/lectionary-commentary/yearb/2012-02-19/transfiguration-sunday>

⁵ Soards, Marion, ed., *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, Year B Advent/Christmas/Epiphany, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993) 177

- Together, these men represent all divine authority for the Jewish people: Moses with the law, and Elijah with the prophetic tradition
- Jesus talking with these men clearly tells us that Jesus is not just apart of any ongoing work of God, but a part of God's redeeming and saving work
- And now there is Jesus, continuing their tradition and work
- Jesus, having calmed the storm and walked on the water earlier in Mark, now on a mountaintop
- And contemplating his own future
- I find myself in awe of Jesus and the decisions he makes within these grand moments of divine manifestation
 - I remind myself: Jesus was fully human, even in moments like these
 - What goes through our minds in pivotal moments when we are exposed to such a high dose of divine radiation, so to speak?
 - Certainly, Jesus must have been aware of what would eventually come to pass if he continues his ministry
 - Perhaps Jesus, here on this mountaintop, had the choice to leave or stay
 - To be taken up into heaven like Elijah, or peacefully buried like Moses
 - But Jesus chose a different path there on that mountain
 - Jesus answer was clear as he descended to continue his journey eventually leading to the cross
 - Like the super heroes in the comics and movies, Jesus took who he was and used it for good.
- We do not know exactly what the disciples saw on that mountain top
 - I am sure they did the best they could to describe it to the believers who follow them
 - Who would later record it in what would become the Gospel of Mark some thirty years later⁶
 - Jesus, Dazzling white clothes, stunned silence, voice from heaven, and babbling words about making dwelling places
 - It is a bit of a mystery, as one is often left without adequate words to describe something so extraordinary and holy
 - But what a gift, the experience of something beyond explanation and understanding

⁶ Authorship of Mark 66 CE, approx thirty years after Jesus' death. Source: Introduction to the Gospel of Mark, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, NRSV, Fourth Edition.

- It reminds us that we, no matter what we do or how smart we are, can never fully understand or explain God
 - And that can open us up to awe and wonder.
- This God, made manifest in Jesus, while in some ways is tangible and touchable, is also beyond explanation, mysterious, and awe-inspiring
- Should we ever get too confident, too certain, and believe we know everything there is to know
- We can look no further to the astounded disciples as they caught just a glimpse of Jesus' true and unknowable nature
- There is so much more to God than we can see or understand.
- But we do know this: this event left its impression on the disciples
- It was almost an after glow: God's creative energy present in that moment in Jesus Christ stuck with them
- And this event, with the others they witnessed, was enough to eventually convince them that in fact sJesus was the Son of God
 - The great Epiphany, the great realization
- It change them into something different from what they were
- They were transformed.
- I wonder- as they walked together down the mountain, if they didn't also glow just a little bit. ⁷
- Perhaps that is the hint we can take away from the comic books and movies
 - And even the Transfiguration
 - When we come close to the divine, when we are exposed to that energy, love, and forgiveness, it can change us at our core.
 - Today is the last day of this season of Epiphany
 - We, like the disciples, have come to see Jesus as much more than a prophet, or a teacher, or even the ancient understanding of a Messiah
 - Now they get it: Jesus is God's very word made flesh.
 - This understanding comes in our liturgical cycle just before we begin our Lenten walk towards crucifixion.
 - We, along with the disciples, now understand that we have been standing in the presence of some powerful energy
 - So the question is this: how has this Epiphany of Jesus Christ changed us?
 - Because without transformation, what we do here is just empty words

⁷ <http://www.sermonsuite.com/free.php?i=788032193&key=2piCqdyopnPuo8nb>

- The Gospel, at its center, is transformative and will not leave us as we are
- It probably won't change us into Christian X-Men, or Godly Hulks
- But it can give us a new identity; change our very core.
- Give us a glow that is unique, different, offering something else other than the shallow solutions offered by our culture
- Something deeper, more lasting, more fulfilling.
- And after, we too can glow a little, reflecting the light of Christ to which we have been exposed.
- Imagine what a church full of people glowing like that can do!
- We can make this place one of welcome and transformation- or dare I say, Transfiguration.

Amen.