

I'm sure you can complete this saying, "It's a bird. It's a plane. It's... [Superman]" Superman can do anything: Able to leap a tall building in a single bound. Faster than a speeding bullet. (That one always puzzles me. Have you ever heard of a slow moving bullet?) Superman can lift anything, beat up anyone, and do anything necessary. His only limitation is when he is around Kryptonite, which reduces him to normal human strength. Otherwise, whatever the problem he can solve it.

Superheroes have been around for a long time - long before comic books started coming out. I consider the biblical character of Samson to be a bit of a superhero. Able to tear himself free from any enclosure. Able to kill lions with his bare hands. He takes the jawbone of a donkey and single handedly kills 1000 men. After this amazing feat of fighting power he throws away the jawbone, sits down and his first thought is, "I'm thirsty." If you know the stories of Sampson you know that he is strong enough to knock down entire stone buildings simply by pushing them over. Samson has two weaknesses. He likes women a little too much - actually a lot

too much. And one of them gets him to reveal his other weakness - that if you cut his hair he loses his strength. Otherwise nothing can stop him.

Today's superheroes like Ironman and The Flash are more sophisticated and developed than Samson and even Superman. Interestingly, the more sophisticated superheroes of today connect us with the gospel's account of the Transfiguration. Theologian Sarah Heinrich writes this, "The Transfiguration has many of the elements of the story of a superhero. There's an arduous trek up a mountain; a tightly knit company of friends on a "mission" together; the appearance of other-worldly figures in dazzling light; the transformation of the hero into an equally sizzling figure; a command from a powerful force from another dimension; a determined descent to battle those other powers back home." (Sarah Heinrich, Working Preacher 2012)

Does that sound like the plot line of a comic book, or an adventure novel like Percy Jackson? But this is a biblical text. We are supposed to read it as an historical account. I want to take it a step further. I've never been into comic books, but I'm told that today's comic book heroes even get

killed sometimes in their adventures. Then sometime later they come back to life. Doesn't that sound even more like Jesus?

The historical events that give rise to the Transfiguration accounts that we have in the Bible are impossible for us to know, at least in this lifetime. But casting the life of Jesus in genre of superhero literature sheds light on who he is, and who we are ultimately.

What is the standard storyline of a superhero? Some supervillain comes and threatens the safety of the residents of a city, or perhaps the country, or even the whole world. Somehow, someday the superhero is notified of the problem. The superhero arrives on the scene, sometimes only a few moments before it is too late. The superhero uses his or her superpowers to overcome the villain and all is well again. The helpless people rejoice in their salvation.

Sounds a lot like the story of Jesus, but there is one twist to the story of Jesus as a superhero, and we don't like it. In a comic book we are the innocent victims saved by the

hero. In Jesus story we aren't the victims, we are the evil villains.

Did some supernatural evil force descend upon the earth and cause Jesus to be crucified? Did some outside mind-controlling force cause everyone in first century Jerusalem cause everyone temporary insanity that they executed the savior of the world? Nope. Ordinary people, living ordinary lives did it.

I think that is the toughest thing to understand about the crucifixion. Whenever someone says, "Jesus died for your sins." You think, "How? I didn't kill him. This all happened before I was born. I didn't do it."

But to think that way is to frame the entire situation wrongly, and if the frame is totally wrong, the picture inside won't be right either. It is our demands, our insistence of the way things in this world have to be that requires God to act as God did.

I like the way the Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber put it in a radio interview. She said, "If you look at Jesus, to me the greatest revelation of who God was, was actually at the cross. Because to me that's not God's little boy, like God is some sort of divine child abuser sending his son - and he had only one, you know - like, come on, give me a break right? You know, God's little boy and he had only one, and as this sort of divine child abuser, or as the cigar-chomping loan shark demanding his point of flesh, you know, he's sending his boy to the - what hogwash, right? That actually is God on the cross, that's God saying, I would rather die than to be in the sin-accounting business that you've put me in."

Or to use the more theologically proper way, Gerhard Forde wrote, "We could not God just up and forgive? Let us start there. If we look at the narrative about Jesus, the actual events themselves, the "brute facts" as they have come down to us, the answer is quite simple. He did! Jesus came preaching repentance and forgiveness, declaring the bounty and mercy of his "Father." The problem, however, is that we could not buy that. And so we killed him... He came to forgive and we killed him for it; we would not have it. It is as simple as that."

He goes on, "But why did we kill him? It was, I expect we must say, a matter of "self-defense." Jesus came not just to teach *about* the mercy and forgiveness of God but actually to *do* it, to *have mercy* and *forgive* unconditionally. It is an act, not an idea... One who comes to actually have mercy and to forgive in God's name is just an absolute and total threat to the way we have decided we must run things here. So either Jesus must go or we must."

And finally from Gerhard Forde, "God's 'problem' is not that he can't be merciful until he has been satisfied but rather that he won't be satisfied until he succeeds in actually having mercy on whom he will have mercy... The question for God is whether he can really succeed in getting through to a people that like the *idea* of forgiveness but doesn't want an actual forgiver,... God's problem is just how actually to *have* mercy, how to get *through* to us."

Maybe that is all too intellectual. Maybe it makes sense. But the truth is, the only way God could convincingly show us how serious he is about love and forgiveness and mercy, is to

embody it - not just teach about it. There is no greater truth of love than dying innocently for a guilty person.

Interpret the Transfiguration as historical fact or as myth or as a comic book superhero account. It doesn't matter. Historical truth that no one denies is that God embodied in an ultimately convincing act how serious he is about forgiveness.

In Gethsemane when Jesus cries out for a "Plan B" the answer he gets is that there is no Plan B. Innocent death it will be, because that is the only thing we'll ever really believe.

If you accomplish nothing else in your entire life, please accomplish this - accepting how serious God is about forgiveness. Amen