“The appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white.”¹ That’s quite a scene! One we might otherwise expect from a superhero movie.

I can see it now: the otherwise normal-looking character suddenly sheds the guise of the everyday and shines forth as an X-Man. He can float, he can fly, the wind picks up and a mist falls, his hair buoyant in the air, and his eyes opaline as he luminesces: levitating he lifts his hands and with a gesture he displays his unbounded powers, and conquering the enemy, the crowd stands in hushed, grateful awe: let us build a dwelling for you, god-man.

But back to Scripture: the Transfiguration - that’s what this scene is called, quite literally the metamorphosis² of Jesus; portrayed in centuries of Christian art as a Jesus aloft and floating, surrounded by pure energetic other-worldly light. “The appearance of his face changed,” the evangelist tells us: and not only was he himself - his body - changed, but his clothes caught the glory, too. Whiter than white, dazzling, “glistening” as the Collect of the Day said in the 1928 Prayerbook. Shining, glimmering, not just glistening, but glistering.

And a voice from the glory-cloud, and the setting atop the mountain, and the ghosts of patriarchs past: Moses and Elijah back from the depths of blessed memory flanking the Transfigured One; the whole thing is simply astonishing.

An 8th Century ivory carving shows a young beardless hero-Jesus, levitating triumphant at the center, dressed in the garments of Roman nobility, flanked by angels, looking directly at the viewer with a kind of unabashedness. He is treading upon dangerous and mythical beasts: a lion and poisonous snake, a dragon and the basilisk;³ the Cross is slung over his shoulder like an Anglo-Saxon longsword - Christ the conqueror, Christ triumphant, Christ the superhuman - it was a potent image for the warrior tribes of northern Europe as they converted to Christianity.

That is the kind of power we might expect Jesus to have, too - the power of the superhero. It’s the kind of power we might expect God the “ultimate being,” all powerful to have -able to swoop in and save the day. And today’s scene of transfiguration might seem at first to set that expectation in our mind.

³ The Greek is from the verb metamorphoseo.
⁴ These were the four beasts mentioned in Psalm 91:13 (90) in the Latin Vulgate: “super aspidem et basilicum calcabis conculcabis leonem et draconem.”
We, after all, tend to believe the way to overcome whatever is evil or resistant to God is by force: superman and the X-Men fight the villain and overcome him with amazing power, just by a hair - the battle is dramatically close; but good triumphs over evil and we leave the theater feeling a sense of hope for our lives. Force is necessary we tell ourselves, power is the way to achieve Good’s ends, and the ends thereby justifies the means.

It was on this day - this Feast of the Transfiguration of our Lord - that another other-worldly light flashed and a cloud overshadowed the earth 72 years ago\(^5\): when we unleashed what seemed then, and what still seems now the nearly unlimited secret power of the atom-bomb at Hiroshima; and after a second three days later, the enemy surrendered - just by a hair - and victory was won for the Allies, and, for a time the world seemed set aright, at least for us. The end, we told ourselves, justified the means then, too.

And yet on on the holy mount, Jesus’ dazzling metamorphosis happens within the context of quiet prayer: it’s as if we can hear him whisper with similar urgency, as Luke records a few chapters in the garden: not my will but yours will be done.\(^5\) Here the ghosts of patriarchs past have come to talk about his departure at Jerusalem: the glistening scene set before us here, with a more thorough look, is not the scene of the superhero unleashing his hidden powers, but of the quiet Christ preparing prayerfully to create salvation.

It was there on another hill, hanging above the ground, flanked by criminals that, naked and disfigured the Christ stretched his arms in complete wretched abandoned human weakness, and died, overcome by the powers of this world and evil and death, a sacrifice to the gods of might we so duly worship.

Glory is not what you think it is, says the Transfiguration to us.

The Evil One, you see, bates us with superhuman power; offering us kingdoms and authority and greatness; the ability to call down God at our beckon: turn these stones into bread; worship me and you will rule; throw yourself down and let God save you\(^7\)… The Crucified One, one the other hand - who is the Transfigured One - opens wide his arms in love, stretches his breast and exhales at the last, sparing nothing to redeem what has given-in to evil, prying open death, and bringing us in, each and every one, making us joint heirs with him as beloved children of God.

For him, and for us glory is stopping at nothing to cooperate with God in the transformation of this world from the nightmare of superhuman might into the Kingdom of holy love. May you, too be transfigured as you hear anew this day what God is calling you to do, to give, to be to make God’s reality ours.

Other Works Consulted


\(^5\) August 6 and 9, 1945.