

Epiphany 5 Year C

Super Mommy Strength

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When my daughter Hannah was 3 years old, she attended a Montessori preschool at the end of our street. Even though it was in walking-distance from our house, it was at the top of a very long hill. And every day I'd walk with her up that hill to take her there.

And you know how 3 year olds are. We'd go slower and slower as the hill got steeper and steeper. We'd get about halfway there and things would grind to a halt. "Carry me Mommy."

The thought of walking another step up that hill seemed impossible to her. The thought of carrying her the rest of the way seemed impossible to me.

And so I would take her hand in mine and say, Hannah, what you need is some Super Mommy Strength. And I would squeeze her hand, and we would start walking really fast, and power up to the next stop sign. Then she'd slow down to a stop, and I'd squeeze her hand again, and up we'd go. Together.

It got to where she'd ask for it as we were making our way. "Can I have some Super Mommy Strength?" It worked often enough.

I've often thought that grace works like that. I'd do pretty well on my own steam, living my life of faith. And then the hill would get particularly steep, and I would slow down to a halt. And the thought of walking another step would feel impossible. And I would cry out to God – often to carry me. And more often than not there would arrive some extra energy, or assistance or aid, and I'd make it up the hill. Amazing grace.

But today's Scriptures are inviting me to think about grace a bit differently, as I hear Paul say, "By the grace of God I am what I am."

Not, by the grace of God I get the job done. Or by the grace of God, I get where I need to go. And thankfully not, there but for the grace of God go I (don't get me started on that one.)

But by the grace of God, I am what I am (OK, who just started channeling Popeye: I am what I am what I am...?).

Popeye aside, our three Scriptures today give us three people of faith who become who they are because of a particular encounter with grace – Isaiah the prophet, Paul the apostle, Peter the disciple.

The grace that they encountered was more than a dose of divine strength to top off their tanks. Each one of these men experienced a direct encounter with God—a theophany. And it wouldn't be the last. These encounters reveal a God who stays near, whose relationship with them makes it possible for them to become the people that God needs them to be, in order to do what God needs them to do.

Consider Isaiah. This passage is referred to as the call of Isaiah; but actually, he's been at it awhile. This story is about a profound transformation that he undergoes so he can enter the next leg of a difficult

journey in the life of a prophet. He has this powerful vision of visiting the Court of God. And much like in a dream where you realize you are not dressed for the occasion, perhaps not dressed at all, Isaiah remembers that no human can look upon God and live.

"Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!" he cries.

Then there's this image that has always given me the willies – a winged seraph touches Isaiah's lips with a hot coal carried in a pair of tongs. And the angel says, "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed, and your sin is blotted out."

And with his unworthiness out of the way, Isaiah is available to go where God is sending him next, carrying a different message than he carried before.

Something similar happens to Paul when he encounters the risen Christ. The first thing that he has to face – after Jesus -- is his own sinfulness, his own short-sightedness despite his best intentions. It takes a while for him to see in the way that God desires him to. But with his prejudices out of the way, Paul is available to go where God is sending him next, with a different agenda than he carried before.

Which brings us to Peter. In the Gospel of Luke, this call story is not the first encounter that Peter has with Jesus. He has already witnessed Jesus' healing and preaching. You might recall that Peter hosted Jesus in his own home, where Jesus healed his mother-in-law. Perhaps it's because of that hospitality that Jesus chooses Peter's boat when Jesus wants an off-shore platform from which to preach. Perhaps that's why Peter accommodates Jesus' request to take him fishing after a long and fruitless night at that very task. Maybe Peter was just being hospitable.

And then fish after fish fill the nets. So many that they need other boats to help them haul them in. So many that the entire fleet is starting to go down under the weight of them.

Unlike the others who are simply amazed, Peter knows a theophany when he sees one. "Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man," he cries at Jesus' feet.

"Don't be afraid," Jesus says. And with his fear out of the way, Peter is available to go where God is sending him next, doing a different kind of fishing than he did before.

Of all of them Paul describes it best: "By the grace of God, I am what I am." In each instance God stands with God's chosen one face to face. And in the blazing truth of that encounter, an old life falls away and a new life begins. A new person emerges. And the walk with God continues anew.

Edward Campbell, writing in the *Oxford Companion to the Bible*, says that in the New Testament it's difficult to differentiate grace from the Holy Spirit, that is the presence of God. It will take 350 years or so for grace to be considered a thing, what Campbell calls "a kind of impersonal entity or quasi-physical force or power which lights upon those predestined to absorb it."¹

I like New Testament grace better. I think we can find ourselves in its presence, with perhaps a little less cinematography. By the grace of God, we are who we are. Because in some way we have found ourselves

¹ Edward Campbell. "Grace." In *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*. , edited by Bruce M. Metzger, Michael D. Coogan, Edward F. Campbell. Oxford Biblical Studies Online, <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/article/opr/t120/e0298> (accessed 05-Feb-2022).

face to face with God; and the truth of that relationship transforms. We understand that we have not only been given a gift we didn't earn, we have been changed by it. And that gift is God's ongoing relationship with us, God's constant walk with us.

Every day as I drive into work I pray for three things: God's grace, God's wisdom and God's love. And sometimes I put in for an order of courage as well. Because in these times I'm relying on God to take the lead in the ongoing walk we are taking together. I'm trusting that Christ will provide what is needed to be his disciple on a road that has suddenly gotten steeper than ever.

And so maybe on second thought, grace is a tiny bit like what happened when Hannah and I would walk up that long hill to preschool. It probably wasn't the Super Mommy Strength that did it. But rather it was the feeling of my hand in hers, the fact that we could stop to rest if need be, and the realization that she was no longer a baby who needed to be carried – but that she had become a girl who could make it up that hill on the power of her own two legs –as long as we were both going there together.

Amen.