



# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE FEAST OF THE TRANSFIGURATION, AUGUST 11, 2019  
EXODUS 34:29-35; PSALM 99; 2 PETER 1:1, 13-21; LUKE 9:28-36

## DR. STRANGE TRIES TO PRAY

**Luke 9:28-36** [*Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah" — not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.*"]

My husband Andrew and I decided to take on a challenge this summer, a challenge posed by me: we decided to watch all 23 films in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, from *Iron Man*, released in 2008, to *Spider-Man: Far From Home*, which hit theaters this summer. There are 23 films in the MCU, as it's called, but really there is just one story, one myth, about a hero or heroine who surrenders to a power beyond herself to discover her identity, and then go on to fulfill her destiny.

This morning, hearing again the Good News of the Transfiguration, I recall the MCU film, *Dr. Strange*, starring Benedict Cumberbatch.

In this variation of the hero myth, Dr. Strange suffers a terrible car accident that severely damages his hands, ending his career. He travels to Nepal for spiritual guidance and, he hopes, a physical cure. He tries to learn from a spiritual guide called the Ancient One, played by a bald Tilda Swinton, but a frustrated Dr. Strange blames his ruined hands for his difficulty in summoning mystical energy, the kind of energy that can open portals to other locations, and other dimensions. He waves his injured hands around, but the CGI light show fails to appear. He can't seem to summon the power

to change anything, no matter how hard he tries to be spiritually open, and spiritually aware.

That's when the Ancient One brings to him another person in their spiritual community who is able to open these portals with ease. When Dr. Strange's classmate waves *his* hands, the theatrical circular light show sparkles to life immediately. Except wait ... this guy *doesn't have any hands*. This advanced pupil in the Ancient One's adult-formation class can cause a spiritual light show with the stumps of his wrists!

Something is wrong with Dr. Strange, but it is not his hands.

Today we hear about another star pupil, the Star Pupil above all others, Jesus himself, who is so advanced in his mystical journey, so adept at the discipline of prayer, that when he ascends a mountain to pray, his garments shine, his face dazzles, and if this scene were filmed by Marvel Studios, his prayers would open sparkly portals to the deep past, and through those portals would walk none other than Moses and Elijah, Israel's greatest patriarch, and Israel's greatest prophet.

Jesus prays *a lot* in Luke. Our third evangelist seems determined to teach us that everything significant that Jesus does, everything significant that Jesus *is*, flows to us through his own practice of prayer. Even on the cross, Jesus prays. Whenever he can catch a break; whenever he is about to do something difficult; whenever his true identity is about to be revealed to others; *Jesus prays*. And like Dr. Strange's classmate, Jesus does not need

hands; he does not need any particular physical or mental power; he simply seems to be a natural, open conduit for divine energy.

In comparison to Jesus, we might justifiably feel a little sheepish about our own prayer practices. When we say our prayers here in this room, there is no light show. Nobody dazzles with a heavenly glow. More than a few of us may steal a glance at our watches while we head toward the next muttering of "Lord, hear our prayer." Maybe some of us wonder if all this prayer we do here is futile. Maybe some of us see "thoughts and prayers" ridiculed in popular culture, and maybe we quietly share a little bit of contempt for the idea that if one simply kneels in prayer, something within that person might change, and (more fantastic still) something out in our weary, war-torn world might change.

Do we really believe that? Does prayer ... do anything? If so, what? If you pray, will you know something you didn't before? Will your aunt be cured of cancer? Will there be fewer mass shootings? Will there be justice and peace at our southern border? Will our world respond effectively to climate change? Will the reign of God triumph?

No, and yes. Those are my answers. First, the No.

No, prayer is not a magical spell we can chant that is guaranteed to cure cancer. We pray for healing for the sick, but we know that there is a difference between healing and curing. When curing doesn't happen, the healing hand of God is still powerfully present in the lives, and in the deaths, of human beings.

God heals bodies, but also relationships, and wounded hearts. If God does not always cure, God always *heals* the deepest brokenness of a fragile human life. Prayer, then, does not raise a protective force field between us and the changes and chances of life that can and will hurt us. No, prayer *lowers* the barrier between us and God, and between you, and me, and our neighbor.

Jesus was an expert at prayer, but he never used it for easy magical solutions. He prayed for friend and enemy alike, but he did not pray for them to be perfectly cushioned from the world and its many heartbreaks. He prayed for himself, but not to give himself a superpower that would save him from a dreadful path. When we meet him today in glory atop the mountain, we see that his prayer does two things, and it is those two things that form my Yes answer to the question, “does prayer do anything?”

Yes. Prayer does two things. First, prayer reveals identity. For Jesus, his prayer revealed him as the New Moses, the New Prophet, the hope of Israel, the hope of the whole world. He shines atop the mountain because his prayer reveals his majesty: he is God’s Son, God’s Beloved. Though Moses descended Mount Sinai glowing with God’s glory, Jesus glows from the inside with the glory of the Holy Trinity. His prayerful conversation with God through the power of the Holy Spirit reveals to us who he is, who they are.

And so, in turn, prayer reveals *our* identity. You are what you pray. Do you pray for the kids in cages, for the black boys bleeding in

the streets, for the shooting victims *and* for the shooters, for whole nations threatened by rising seas, for all people according to their needs? If you do, these prayers reveal who you are, to yourself as well as everyone else. (If I pray for more creature comforts or vengeance against my enemies, that reveals who I am, too...) Your prayer for your aunt with cancer reveals your brave love, your boundless compassion, your courage to stand with her, and with God, in the face of a terrible dilemma, and to participate in her painful healing, in whatever form that healing might take. Today, this morning, our prayers--for your aunt and for the whole world--our prayers flow from the Word of God. After opening up the Word of God, we confess our faith and then pray for the *whole world*. God’s Word moves us to pray and shapes our prayers, and these prayers tell us who we are.

Second, prayer is *engagement*. Jesus doesn’t just star in a dazzling light show atop that mountain. Soon after this, as Luke phrases it, Jesus “sets his face toward Jerusalem.” And while Moses and Elijah join him on the mountaintop, they don’t just catch up like old friends, or simply shine delightfully. They talk about his coming departure in Jerusalem, in Greek, his *exodon*, the word for exodus. That’s right, Jesus accomplishes in Jerusalem, in Luke’s telling, an *exodus* like that of the Israelites from Egypt: a triumphant going out from death into life; a deliverance from oppression and bondage; Good News for all who are held in the deathly grip of sin and injustice and despair. The prayers Jesus prays

on the mountain strengthen him to accomplish this excruciating exodus, for us and for all people. His prayer is nothing less than engagement in the one thing he must do, the one thing his whole life is about.

And so, in turn, prayer is this for us. Prayer is *engagement*. When we pray for those in need, we do not then wait for the magic spell to take effect. We do not, like Dr. Strange early in his movie, helplessly feel frustration as we wait for something amazing to happen. We surrender our own imperfect hands and feet into the problems that are whirling around and within us. We become *involved*. We are strengthened by God in prayer to set our faces toward the one thing we must do, the one thing our whole life is about.

And what is that one thing?

It is this: we set our faces toward this good but troubled world, not as immortal sorcerers or wondrous magicians, but as the prophets and apostles God has strengthened us to be.

Don't worry. You don't need a surgeon's hands or dazzling superpowers. You need only to pray. Your prayers will tell you who you are, and then God will set you on your path. You need not shine in glory. For that, we have fairest Lord Jesus, Beautiful Savior, the One who shines most brightly, the One who even now pauses at this Table, and bids us all welcome, welcome to gather in prayer for the life and health of this whole good world.



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