

Sermon Transcript: Sovereignty Superheroes (James 4)

I don't know about you, but I grew up loving superheroes. Like, I would get up early just to catch those superhero cartoons. Saturday morning *Super Friends* was a regular thing in my household growing up. But I found over the years that people have their own favorite superheroes, and I don't know if that's true for you. So, do any of you have any particular favorite superheroes?

Aquaman? Brave choice, Paul. Brave choice. Fantastic, I love it. What else? Superman. Wonder Woman. Wolverine. The Flash. Wow, lots of good ones here. You know, my favorite was Green Lantern. Yeah, Green Lantern had a magic green ring and, just by the power of his own will, he was able to do all these amazing things with that power ring. Later, I went to seminary and found that liking Green Lantern is probably the worst superhero for a Presbyterian pastor. Because theologically, the idea that your superpowers are going to come from your own will doesn't jive with scripture really well. I still think it's a cool ring, but I have realized that I might need to pick one of your choices instead.

As we've been going through the book of James, James has been trying to help us out to prepare us for real life. I told you in one of the earlier weeks that I think of the book of James as like, "Okay, okay, but how do I actually get through this life?" You know? And so we've heard from James already that you need to make sure that your actions are matching up with your words. And by the way, with those words, watch your mouth. We need to be careful what we speak. And this week, James is giving us a lesson in chapter four. It's not the last yet, but it's a lesson for us to take out. And it's not just something to guide us; it's this idea that God is actually the one in charge, not you. But I'm going to contend this day that if I do this teaching right, each and every one of you is going to leave here today with superpowers. Pretty cool. I can't promise you can talk to fish, but you will have superpowers.

The Perspective to Fly

This belief in God being in charge is not an easy thing. You can say the words; you can throw it out there at just the right moments when it feels good. But to actually live your life fully trusting that God is in charge is very difficult. But I assure you that if you do, it will, in a sense, give you superpowers in this life.

I heard one of the things that you shouted out was Superman. Superman—the ability to fly. Oh my goodness, how amazing would that be, right? And I think that this belief in the sovereignty of God—that God is in charge—in a sense gives you that type of ability to fly above the muck of everyday life, to get above the workings of everyday life and to see a different perspective. All the superheroes did it—Superman, Batman, Spider-Man—they all get up high to look down upon the area that they are a part of, to have a perspective, to see what's really going on. And when you have that understanding that God's in charge, it makes you aware that no matter what you're in the midst of, you can have that higher, flying-high type of perspective to know that the light of God is always there above any cloud cover. To know that the presence of God is there above any muck that seems to be entrapping you in this life.

The Strength of Wonder Woman

Some of you brought up Wonder Woman. What a great figure—incredible strength and ability to just fight through any type of adversity that comes. You can have that superpower, too. Because when we truly believe that God is in charge, it means that when we encounter a situation that looks like chaos, that looks like it's out of control, that looks like evil is winning—we know. We know that ultimately God's in charge, and this situation is not going to get so out of hand that God cannot use that for good, because it's all under God.

Those of you who've been around a while and been in some Bible studies maybe with me know that I have a special affinity for the ending of the book of Genesis. You get to that 50th chapter, verse 20, and you get these brothers who are coming back to their brother, Joseph. They've done him wrong over the years, and they're coming because they're afraid he's going to punish them for the way they've treated him, because now Joseph has all this power. And Joseph says these words to them—and I tell you that these words that Joseph said to his brothers when they were revealing him, after they had wronged him and were seeking his forgiveness—these words that Joseph says, I believe, sum up so much of the entire Bible message and the gospel message and might be the key to unlocking the superpower in you. And he said these words: "That which you intended for evil, God intended for good so that a multitude might be fed this day."

All of the intentions and actions that go on, none of them get so far out of control that God cannot use it for good, that it does not become part of the plan. It's always under control. And when you have that, it's like having super strength. You can carry any load. You can carry any burden because you know that the one who is in charge of everything is even in charge of this moment. Have you ever been in one of those instances where things are just going crazy and nutso around you, and there's that one person of incredible faith that you can just look at and say, "How are they holding it together?" It's Wonder Woman strength. It's that kind of faith. It's that kind of knowledge that this is within the bounds of God's control, God's oversight, God's power, and so you can have the strength to make it through that. Nothing is going to stand up against you because God is with you.

The Invulnerability of Wolverine

I'm going to go for the deep cut. I heard someone yell out Wolverine. And I'm enough of a superhero nerd—I know that one. I was waiting for really deeper cuts; I was waiting for Flaming Carrot to show up, but not many of you know who Flaming Carrot is. But Wolverine, for those who don't know, one of Wolverine's superpowers is that he has super healing. He basically can't die; he just keeps healing from whatever wounds come. And I'm telling you that you can have that superpower, too. While you might have the strength to face it, sometimes you get wounded in those situations and sometimes things hurt. But you have the ability to prevail through that, and all the more so when facing the ultimate source of fear in a lot of our lives, and that's death.

Now, here's the part where the teaching of God being in charge is going to be really hard for a lot of us. Because we've all been in moments where we lost somebody and, in our mind, that person was too young. That timing was not right. That should not have happened. And the hard teaching: If we believe the words of the psalmist that say to us that all of my days are known by you, God; if we believe the words that tell us from scripture that God has ordained each and every breath that you take, then that means that no one leaves this earth before they're done doing

what God intended for them to do in this life. And it means that when we're facing the death of a loved one, or maybe even our own end of days on this earth, that we don't need to be afraid.

In a sense, we're invulnerable until that day that the Lord has ordained. You are not going to pass from this earth until the day that God lets that happen. God will call you as surely as someone is calling that person right now. You should answer it. For the love of mercy, you should answer that! Because when God calls, it's time. Not when other people call—when God calls. And so you are literally invulnerable until the day that God determines you are done with what has been placed for you to do in this life.

Our funeral liturgy has these words: We celebrate the life of the person whose baptism is now complete in death. Their spiritual journey is complete—not just done, not just finished, not just cut off. Now, here's the thing: This is incredibly hard because many of us have lost some very dear people, and it doesn't seem right. And we don't understand the timing; we don't understand how it can be that someone's journey is done when we want more. When our will wants more time with them. When we're convinced there was more for them to do. And that creates such a grief and a pain. And your lack of being able to accept that is not a lack of faith; it's just grief and pain. And it's important that you're willing to share that as well with God, because the shoulders that created this earth can handle the weight of your grief as well.

Accepting that God is in charge is not a denial of the pain that you might experience or the grief. In fact, it tells you that there's a space made for it. And it's okay. It's okay because when we're grieving someone, we're just acknowledging just how beautiful a job God did by putting that person in our lives. So that's a hard one. But if in the midst of loss you can just hold on to saying, "I don't understand this, and in fact, I don't like it, but I have faith that you are in charge, God. And I know that you have goodness planned for this world. And I thank you for the gift that came before this pain." That's maybe the best place that any of us can get to in the middle of it. And that's okay. I think maybe just being able to get through it might be the superpower.

The Waves of Aquaman: Secondary Causes

Once we've faced all these challenges with these collections of superpowers that come from really trusting that God's in charge, there's still one more to go. And that's that God works not just through miracles and big "Shazam" moments, but God works through what some theologians call the "secondary causes." God likes to work through us—through our little actions.

I think this is where our friend Aquaman might come into play. What's Aquaman's main superpower? He could talk to fish. That doesn't sound like a big power. But the truth is, that little bit of power can do amazing things. It can turn the tide of a situation—no pun intended. And in the same way, if we trust that God's in charge and we know that God's going to use even our small actions to create big waves out there—in our lives, in the lives of those that we care about and love, in our community, in our world.

There's little things. There's a phone call you can make today that will increase the goodness and the grace and the mercy in this world. There's a phone call that many of you could make today

that would brighten the world of another individual who lives in this world, and you have a chance to do it. And according to James 4, verse 17, if you know of a thing that you're supposed to do and you don't do it, that's a sin. Dang. That last line hit hard. I don't know about you, but that last line in today's reading hit hard.

But you have that—to do the little things. To care about someone, to reach out to them, to take a meal, to give a moment of your time of conversation, to make a small donation of your effort or of a gifting to a family that needs it. I mean, there's so many little things that can be done. And if we believe that God's in charge, then what we know is that God is going to use your little prayer, your little action, your little phone call, your meal that you take over—God's going to use all of that as part of a bigger plan because we believe that God's in charge and working that bigger plan.

You are a Superhero

And when you put all these things together, I'm telling you, you're a superhero. You are a person who sees the situation like others cannot see it and understands the presence of God in it. You are a person who can bear a burden that others can't possibly lift because you trust that God is in the midst of it, and God can use even that mess for goodness. And you are invulnerable to the moment to which God calls you back home, and then you know that your good works on this earth are complete.

You can take the smallest of actions—the smallest of what feels like not even a superpower to you—and know that God will use it as part of a bigger plan. Why? Because God's in charge. And the plan is made up of all of the little efforts because God plans on doing things through you.

Life is still hard, and sometimes God's ways don't make sense and, in fact, we don't know how to deal with it. But if in the midst of it the person of faith can find their way to trusting the One that they know loves them... and there is nothing—no height, nor depth, nor power on this earth or off this earth—that can separate you from the love of God and the power that that has in your life.

Go forth. Be superheroes because you are the people of God. Hallelujah. Amen.