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Sermon Transcript: The Batman Effect

How do we take care of all the brokenness in this world? How do we make the world a better place? How do we make ourselves into better people? Well, the good news is that about a year ago, a group of psychologists in Milan solved this for us. They did a study. What they did was they had a woman with a prosthetic that she wore that made her appear as though she was very, very pregnant. And she got onto a subway car. And then they watched, and in this crowded subway car, only 37% of the people bothered to offer up a seat to her so that she could sit down. And then they did this: they ran the experiment again, but at the other end of the car, they had another individual get on the train, and it was Batman—it's come to be known as the "Batman effect." Batman would get on the same train as the woman with the prosthetic stomach, but he stood more than 10 feet away from her, never looked at her, never said anything to her, just stood on the same train as her. And when Batman was there, 67% of the people offered up their seat to the woman on the train. Just by being in the car, Batman made it better. The funny thing is, afterwards they interviewed the folks, and only 44% of the people who offered up a seat said they even noticed that Batman was there. But it still had an effect, now known as the Batman effect. It made things better. It made people behave better. The History Lesson and the Cry for Help

The people of Israel in our scripture list today are desperate for some kind of effect. I bet they wish they had Batman showing up on the scene. Things were not going right. It was not just in their eyes, but they had not been faithful; they'd been falling apart as a society. The Midianites had been taking over, and they cried out for help. Put up the bat signal!

And who showed up on the scene? But a prophet of the Lord. Ooh, this could get good. And what does that prophet do? That prophet gives them a history lesson. Isn't that what you've always wanted when you're having a tough time and a hard day, is for someone to come in and give you a history lesson? That's exactly what the prophet does. Says, "God did this for you. God did this. God did this. God did this." Gives six different things that God did for you. "And what was your response to that? You did not follow his ways." It's six actions of God and one failure of the people. There's your history lesson. And still they cried out for help. I bet we can kind of relate to that. There's times when we cry out for help and it's not always when we've been at our best as a Christian, as a person of faith. There's times where we offer up our own desperate prayers and we know that we don't come to the table with even a week, much less a lifetime of faithfulness. It might be a desperate prayer in a parking garage outside of an oncologist's office. It might be a worried parent at 2:00 a.m. when a kid

isn't home yet and that prayer comes. It might be in a moment when there is such brokenness in your lives and relationships aren't what they should be, and so you cry out for help to God, all the while in all these situations knowing that you haven't exactly been the most faithful recently. And yet the prayer comes. Gideon's Pitiful Farm Work and New Identity And for the Israelites, despite their unfaithfulness, they cry out for help and God responds—actually, with more than a history lesson, God reaches out to Gideon. Now, you might be thinking, "Ah, here's our Batman figure now, right?" Gideon was no impressive figure. He certainly wasn't as strong as Batman, and he wasn't as rich as Batman either. He was threshing wheat in a winepress, which means basically he was hiding out from the enemy in a hole trying to thresh the wheat, which doesn't work so well. It's a pitiful display of farming to try to do that. You're supposed to get the wind involved. How can you do that down in a hole? He's not exactly terribly brave. And when he gets called upon by the Lord, he says, "Ah, but I'm from like the weakest clan, and even in my family, like I'm the wimp. And you want me?" And God looks at him and says, "You brave, strong warrior." Honestly, with him in that hole doing that—whatever that is that he's doing, trying to get the wheat—and with his stature in his clan, it almost reads like a joke. But God declares a title on him that is above where he is. It's almost a brand-new identity. You know, in fact, psychology has come to the rescue years ago and taught us another Batman effect. Back in 2016, they did an experiment with four- and six-year-olds, and they gave them this very boring task to do at a computer. Incredibly tedious, boring task. You just do it as long as you can. Now, there's an iPad over here loaded with games, and anytime you want, you could take a break and go play on the iPad, but we want you to try to work and get this done on this computer. And then every so often, we're going to have you say, "Am I working hard?" So they would stop and reflect as to how they're doing: "Am I working hard?" And so they worked away at it. And they were terrible. They left that task so quickly, ran over to the iPad, it's almost like they forgot about what they were supposed to be doing. But then they took another group of four- and six-year-olds and they put a Batman cape on them, and they said, "Now, every once in a while, I want you to say, 'Is Batman working hard?'" And you know what happened? Those kids with the cape on asking, "Is Batman working very hard?" worked a lot longer at the task at the computer station. Just getting them out of that self-identity, giving them another identity to lean into, had an effect—another Batman effect. And you might argue that it brought out a better version of themselves. Now, full disclosure on the study: at the end of the day, both groups of kids spent most of their time on the iPad. Being Batman's only cool so long, as maybe was displayed earlier in the children's message. "I'll Wait for You" And this title given to Gideon doesn't really seem to have a transformative effect on him. God calls him a warrior and Gideon's just like, "I don't know that I'm the right one for this job. And I'm not even sure you are who you say you are. I'm going to just go and fix a meal for us. And maybe in that offering of that meal, I'll come to believe that you are

who I think you might be." And this is the moment in the story that is probably the most radical and the most transformational and maybe the most important, is that God says, "I'll wait. I'll wait for you." I don't know about you, but there's not any part of me that feels so brave to say, "Hey, God, hold up. I need you to wait on me." But that's what Gideon does. And the amazing thing here is that God waits. And that's the grace. It's not that the people of Israel were changing their ways; they still had their statues of other gods in the front yard. Keep reading the chapter, you find out they literally still have their statue of the other gods in their front yard, and God still comes to help them. They haven't turned it around. They've just whined about it and cried out, and God has responded. And when one is called out and into duty, instead of just simply jumping up and saying, "Here I am, Lord. I'm ready to serve," he says, "I don't know. I don't think I can do it. I'm kind of a wimp. I'm going to go fix us some lunch. Could you just wait?" And God says, "Okay, I'll wait." So many times we want to make our faith an exercise in psychology: of how can I manipulate my mind to be a better person? How can we work the crowds so that things are better? But what we have to understand is that the gospel is not an exercise in psychology. It's an exercise in theology. It's the idea that God will show up even when you don't. It's the idea that God will wait for you when you're not ready. That's crazy. But that's the gospel. That's grace that comes not when you're so awesome, not when you're Batman, but when you're not.

Our faith is not a transaction with God. It's not where we do good and God gives us something. It's not a transaction with God; it's a transformation by God. And we have a God who is willing to wait until you get your stuff together. And that's grace. And that's good news because it means that we don't have to have that amazing endurance, because eventually Batman gets off the subway car, because eventually the thrill of wearing the cape wears off for that little kid, and because eventually you just get tired of trying to be the good one all the time and you fail and you trip up and you need forgiveness—and God waits for you. That's the grace. So that your response gets to be a celebration. Such that your faithfulness becomes a response to God's faithfulness. You are not asked for a transaction with God. You are invited into a transformation by God. And that's the good news. And that's the gospel. And that's what we lean into.

To God be the glory.

Hallelujah. And amen.