GOD
ON THE STREETS OF
GOTHAM

WHAT THE BIG SCREEN BATMAN
CAN TEACH US ABOUT GOD AND OURSELVES

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To Mom and Dad, who never gave up on me.
You're my heroes.

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INTRODUCTION

IF YOU READ this book and want someone to blame for it, waggle your finger at William Hanna and Joseph Barbera. It's all their fault.

When I was a kid, I practically lived for Saturday morning cartoons. I'd leap out of bed, run to the TV room (my footie PJs slipping on the linoleum), flip on the television, and watch cartoons until my mom made me stop—and almost all of them were from Hanna-Barbera's über-prolific (and ultra-cheap) animation studios. I loved 'em all, from *Hong Kong Phooey* to *Speed Buggy* to *Captain Caveman and the Teen Angels*.

But nothing could compare to the excellent awesomeness of *Super Friends*.

To my five-year-old self, *Super Friends* was the pinnacle of cartoon quality—*Citizen Kane* with Froot Loops commercials. I was mesmerized by these caped heroes and heroines: Superman with his super strength, super speed, and that super curly lock of hair on his forehead; Wonder Woman

with her nifty Lasso of Truth and awesome Invisible Plane; Aquaman with his . . . um . . . well, okay, Aquaman's ability to talk with fish and ride huge seahorses seemed a little impractical to me, even at age five. Really, how many diabolical crime sprees take place in large bodies of water?

And then, of course, there were Batman and Robin. Sure, they might not have had the outlandish super abilities their Justice League brethren did, but what they lacked in super strength, stealth planes, or the ability to talk with sea anemones, they made up for with technological savvy, clever wordplay, and sheer gumption. They made a great team. If you're going to be trapped in an old gold mine or stranded on a faraway planet or thrown back in time by a gigantic space ray, it's nice to have company.

It's easy to see the appeal of these guys. For kids like me who could barely scoot a chair under a table, superheroes were the epitome of everything we wanted to be but weren't: strong, brave, good, and strong. Powerful, too. Did I mention strong? No one would dare tell Superman when it was time to go to bed or force Batman to eat his veggies. And naturally, being the sort of boy who hated both bedtime and beets, it wasn't long before I started slipping into superhero fanaticism. The first coloring book I remember having was themed around Batman's brave exploits. I'd draw my own *Super Friends* stories. Every time I got together with my best friend, Terry, we'd shove rolled-up sock balls into our sleeves, tie towels around our necks, and zip around the backyard pretending to be Superman and Batman, righting imaginary wrongs and saving innocent stuffed animals wherever we might find them.

But every superhero experiences his share of adversity—especially those who are less than four feet tall and still a decade away from earning a driver's license. There comes a time when they must face an adversary too big and too powerful for them to tackle. They must deal with a threat that causes even the strongest of superheroes to quake in their primary-colored boots.

I called mine, simply, "Daddy."

THE BOY WONDER AND THE DAD OF DOOM

My father didn't send me to bed without my utility belt or take away my Bat Big Wheel. He went way beyond that. He told me that superheroes were bad. And then he said I couldn't have anything to do with them anymore. It was like he pointed an anti-happiness ray gun at me and pulled the trigger.

Had I been up on real superhero lore back then (rather than just a steady diet of *Super Friends*), I might have interpreted my dad's resistance to my heroic calling as a betrayal akin to Grecian tragedy. After all, my father was my hero—so strong he could carry me on his shoulders, so fast I could never get away from him when bath time came. He could talk like Mickey Mouse, tell jokes better than Tim Conway, and when the car battery died, he could push the car all by himself—with Mom and me in it. He was a *fireman*, for cryin' out loud! Forget Batman: when I really thought about what I wanted to be when I grew up, I wanted to be my dad.

And there was a time when he seemed to share my

keenness for superheroes. He incorporated them into my bedtime stories (at my request), helped me build a Superman model (okay, he built it for me), and one time even designed a big, flannel *S* that I could pin to my shirt.

But something happened to my dad—something took him over, body and soul—and my world was never quite the same.

That "something" was Jesus.

See, Jesus didn't just gently ask my dad to "come, follow me." It was like Jesus took him by the collar and hollered, "YOU'RE GONNA FOLLOW ME, BUDDY!" And my dad followed like paparazzi follow Lindsay Lohan. And he took the whole family with him.

It was tough, or so I hear. My mom was already a Christian, but her Presbyterian brand of faith was pretty traditional, full of a steady dose of hymns and potluck suppers. So when my dad started speaking in tongues and pouring wine down the sink, she didn't have a great frame of reference for what was going on. And when my dad's enthusiasm got us kicked out of our hometown church and ostracized by most of her friends, well, Mom was one loud "Hallelujah!" away from heading back home to her mother's, taking me and my little sister with her.

I was still pretty young—about six or seven—so I was blessedly unaware of how close I was to growing up fatherless. All I knew was that we switched churches and I didn't see Terry (who was Presbyterian) nearly as much. But the biggest, most cataclysmic change was that I wasn't allowed to watch *Super Friends* anymore. My tiny collection of superhero comics and

Colorforms sets disappeared. My solitary Batman record vanished. It was as if a big hunk of kryptonite had been dropped in my bedroom, dispelling all superheroes and sidekicks with nary a "fwooping" sound.

The whole superhero cleansing episode left me more bewildered than sad. My dad explained to me how I should have just one hero—Jesus—and while I didn't really understand how anyone could ever confuse Jesus with Batman, I mostly moved on. I was thirty-five pounds of scrawniness with not even a batarang to my name. What else could I do?

Fast-forward thirtysomething years, and now I've written a book about Batman and Jesus. In it, I often mention them together, in the very same sentence (like this one)—which either completely refutes my father's fears or absolutely confirms them.

My dad and I chuckle about those crazy days now, but the truth is he probably feels a smidge more guilt over the whole superhero cleansing thing than he should. Even with my love of superheroes still obviously intact, I can see where he was coming from. Here was a man trying to figure out what being "on fire for the Lord" should look like in real, everyday life. That's not an easy thing for any of us to navigate, and it certainly wasn't for my father, given that the Bible does not tell us explicitly how to view animated superheroes. Are they idols? Reflections of greater spiritual truths? Do they show kids that it's good to stand up for what's right and what you believe in, or do they teach that violence is the answer to almost any problem? These are pretty legitimate questions, I think—ones we'd do well to ask today, quite frankly. We

shouldn't accept anything this world offers without some thought. And, of course, my dad's decision was complicated (as all these things tend to be) by not just who he was at the time, but how *he* was raised too.

BATMAN BAGGAGE

When my dad was a kid, lots of folks were buzzing about how horrible comic books were for the juvenile mind—how violent and sexualized and inherently corrupting they were. The most obvious counterstrike against comics came with 1954's *Seduction of the Innocent* by psychologist Fredric Wertham, who made the case that Superman was a fascist, Wonder Woman was into bondage, and Batman and Robin were gay lovers. But comics were of grave concern to parents and psychologists well before that, as a 1948 issue of the *American Journal of Psychotherapy* makes clear. Several psychologists participated in a symposium titled "The Psychopathology of Comic Books," in which the new medium fared very poorly indeed.

"If there is only one violent picture per page—and there are usually more—every city child who was six years old in 1938 has by now absorbed an absolute minimum of eighteen thousand pictorial beatings, shootings, stranglings, blood-puddles and torturings-to-death, from comic books alone," wrote Gerson Legman for the symposium. Lumping in the harmful influence of radio and movies, Legman said that "the effect—and there are those who think it has been a conscious intention—has been to raise up an entire generation of adolescents who have felt, thousands upon thousands of

times, all the sensations and emotions of committing mur-
der, except pulling the trigger."

And in some ways, these cautious psychotherapists and par-
ents were right: comic books were (and are) violent. They did
(and do) feature some pretty sexually charged images. Critics
would say they excuse vigilantism and posit that as long as
you can beat up your adversary, everything is A-OK. And let's
be honest, *I* might even say that. I work for an organization
that examines all sorts of secular media, from movies to video
games, from a Christian point of view, and I'm constantly writ-
ing about how problematic depictions of sex and violence can
be on young minds (and on old ones too). The images we see
affect us in ways both overt and subtle, and we might not ever
notice that these things are influencing us at all.

Modern superhero movies are all the more problematic.
In my gig, I'm always called to be mindful of Philippians 4:8,
which tells us all to concentrate on "what is true, and honor-
able, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable." And
while you could make an argument that Batman can often
be noble and right and admirable, he also can be brutal and
angry and not very admirable at all. And when you throw
in the death-by-pencil stuff in *The Dark Knight*, the modern
incarnation of the Batman universe simply doesn't feel very
Philippians-like.

And let's not forget my dad's primary concern, the whole
issue of superheroes being a replacement for Christ. Maybe
to some six-year-olds, Superman seems like a divine force—
as cool as any angel and maybe even cooler than Jesus. After
all, Superman can lift train engines, stop bullets, and fly.

Jesus performed some neat miracles and all, but feeding five thousand people isn't quite as dramatic as *melting steel with your eyes*! And then, even though Jesus is the Son of God, he allowed himself to die. As adults we see the significance of Christ's sacrifice, but kids, without a firm grasp on the concepts of sin and grace but really familiar with the second-grade bully, long for a savior who can conk a few skulls. Even the disciples thought that's what Jesus was going to do—right up to his crucifixion.

So if you're reading this right now and questioning what business I have taking a dark, secular superhero and turning him into a Christian role model, let me stress that I get your concerns. I've thought through them and wrestled with them and prayed about them more than was strictly helpful.

And I've set them, gently and respectfully, aside.

Here's why.

SOMETHING SUPER

I believe we can find evidence of God everywhere. We are his creation, after all, and who we are and what we do cannot help but carry his mark. From the loftiest mountain to the lowliest weed, everything around us bears his autograph. And as we are God's most marvelous achievement, made in his own image, we're inherently beautiful. We can't help it. And so when we, in turn, create something—a mimicry of God's own awesome act of creation—a bit of God's life and love filters into what we mold and make, regardless of our intent.

Now, there's a flip side to this. Just as we all trace our

lineage to the mind of the Almighty, our creations are marred by the fallen world in which we live. Just as the spark of the divine is in everything, so is the taint of sin. As such, our most beautiful, our most holy of constructs are not free of the world's sour corruption, the mark of the fall. Nothing escapes it. Nothing in this world is above it.

Which makes Gotham City, the world of Batman, so illustrative in many ways of our own failed and fallen realm. Gotham's a dark place, full of shadow, corruption, and bad intentions. It's not pure or pretty, and none of the people in it are free of sin's taint. And yet underneath the grime and graffiti and dark forebode, there's goodness, too. There are those who believe there's a spark worth preserving in this desperate city. There are those who see the beauty underneath. They see the spirit of the city and believe it's still possible, somehow, to redeem it.

Sure, Batman's stomping grounds aren't always "right" or "noble" or "admirable." But neither was the world in which the apostle Paul lived back when he wrote to the Philippians. And neither is ours. We were collectively kicked out of paradise a long time ago, and perfect purity is as elusive as a unicorn carrying licorice whips. Every day, we're exposed to the imperfect, the ugly, the reality of our fallen world and our frail natures.

But is there good to be found here? Yes. Even the stained world of Gotham still contains moments of nobility, purity, and loveliness. We can admire the admirable here; we can celebrate what's right. We can concentrate on those aspects within the city's gritty confines and perhaps uncover a spark of the divine in superherodom's gloomiest character. We won't

find a *substitute* for Jesus, but we may find a *servant*—even if he doesn't fully understand it and might not always act like it.

I hope to show that Batman followed something of a sacred call, even if he didn't know exactly where that call came from. He found a special purpose, even if he didn't know who placed that purpose in front of him. He'll teach us a bit about goodness and God and our own conflicting natures, becoming an unwitting spiritual instructor. I believe we're all a little like Batman, trying to find our way in a messed-up reality and yet knowing, deep in our being, that Someone thinks we're special and that we can *be* special. Even as we plow through our very normal, non-superhero lives, we're all called for a purpose we can hardly imagine.

Perhaps when all is said and done, Batman isn't all that different from who my father was when I was six. Perhaps they're simply men who, in spite of the odds and obstacles facing them—in spite of tempting the wrath of Gotham's villains or the ire of a little boy—heard a different call and followed it the best they could.

Chapter 1

MASKED

*One may understand the cosmos, but never the
ego; the self is more distant than any star.*
—G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*

IT TAKES A SPECIAL PERSON to dress up like a flying rodent. And when I say *special*, I mostly mean *weird*.

And when I say *weird*, I mean *weird for grown-ups*. My son used to wear a homemade bat outfit around the house when he was four, flapping its sewn-on wings in a desperate effort to fly around the living room. But were he still doing so today, at age twenty, I'd sit him down and encourage a less eclectic sense of fashion. It's one thing to wear a bat costume to bed; it's another to wear one to job interviews.

Granted, Bruce Wayne—Batman's moneyed alter ego—doesn't need a job. Gotham City's prominent playboy billionaire has more money under his sofa cushions than most of us have in our checking accounts. And if he ever *wanted*

a job for some inexplicable reason, he owns a whole corporation full of middle managers who'd be falling all over themselves to hire him. Rich folk have more license than the rest of us to engage in, shall we say, eccentric hobbies. If Lady Gaga can dress up in meat for the occasional award ceremony, who's going to begrudge Bruce a cowl and cape?

But Bruce's eccentricity—if we can call it that—goes far deeper. When he puts on his mask and straps on his utility belt, he's not playing dress-up. In his case, clothes really do make the man. What he wears is in some critical, half-understood way more reflective of the real Bruce Wayne than his billionaire playboy facade is or could ever be. When he wears this dark guise, Bruce shoots past eccentricity and reaches beyond weird. As Batman, he flies into a dangerous, dreamlike world that at times can resemble an acid trip gone terribly awry. And he has the almost unthinkable impression that he can somehow make this nightmare landscape *better*.

This is more than a mere oddity. It's a psychosis.

Or . . . a calling.

WHY SO SERIOUS?

Whatever you call it, Batman's been doing it for a long time. He began his career in *Detective Comics* No. 27 in May 1939, when the country was still mired in the Great Depression and the planet was speeding toward World War II. He was a dark vigilante then, suitable for those uneasy times when gangsters and crooks sometimes seemed beyond the reach of

the law. For more than seventy years, he's been fighting crime and wrestling with evildoers in comics, newspapers, television, and movies, and in the imaginations of eight-year-old boys wearing tied-on capes and forty-year-old men with too much time on their hands. And while he hasn't always been the grim character he was in the beginning, he's always had a bit of an edge. Even in the colorful, campy ABC television show that popularized the character in 1966, Adam West's Caped Crusader never laughs. For him, crime fighting is serious business . . . and that's the joke.

Now, of course, West's straight-faced superhero is long gone, replaced in popular culture by Christian Bale's brooding Batman in Christopher Nolan's trilogy (*Batman Begins*, *The Dark Knight*, and *The Dark Knight Rises*). The DC Comics character is often complex and conflicted. For seventy-plus years, we've called him a hero.

But is he? And if he is, what makes him so? We've grown so used to the guy that we sometimes forget how disturbing his persona is, how disturbing it was *designed* to be. He's no cookie-cutter crime fighter with a Dudley Do-Right dimple or a Superman smile who will tell children to mind their studies, mind their parents, and always, always floss. From the very beginning, Batman has been a dark character, more at home in Gotham's shadows than its light.

So as we dive into a book that attempts to use Batman as some sort of spiritual instructor, a shadowy guide who may help us walk better in the light, it's best to remember not just who we *want* Batman to be but who he *is*. If we saw Batman on the street and didn't know who he was, we'd run away

from, not toward, the guy. If we saw something like him in medieval art, we'd think he was more demon than angel.

Before the lessons begin, we must meet our instructor; we must see if this guy has anything to teach us, anything to share. Can we trust him? What if there's something not quite right underneath that cowl of his? What if he's not a superhero at all?

IT'S A BIRD, IT'S A PLANE, IT'S A MESSIAH METAPHOR!

We all know what superheroes are supposed to be about—how they look and talk and act. Batman may arguably be the most popular superhero around these days, but when we think of a generic superhero, there's still a pretty good chance that we envision another DC Comics creation—that big dude from Metropolis with the *S* on his chest. "Now *that's* a superhero," we might say. Superman defined the word, and we know that if Superman and Batman tangled in a mixed martial arts ring, the Man of Steel would clean Batman's belfry. The guy's a rock 'em, sock 'em demigod, graced with extraterrestrial super strength, speed, and good manners. And from the very beginning, he was presented as a savior.

Superman, as we know the story today, was born Kal-El (a Hebrew-inflected name interpreted by some to mean "the voice of God") on a faraway planet destroyed in a tragic cataclysm. His parents shipped him off to Earth just before things got really nasty—not just to save the boy's life, but to send him to a world that Kal-El, in turn, could save.

"They can be a great people, Kal-El, if they wish to be,"

his father, Jor-El, tells Superman in the 2006 film *Superman Returns*. "They only lack the light to show the way. For this reason above all, their capacity for good, I have sent them you . . . my only son." Powerful, good, and incorruptible, Superman seems both Greek god and Christian saint. And in case anyone missed the metaphor up to that point, in *Superman Returns* we see him sacrifice himself for the world . . . and yet return, as it were, from the dead.

Batman, conversely, is no smiling, superhuman alien sent to save humanity. He shares very little in common with the Man of Steel. We call Batman a superhero, but he has no special abilities to speak of, no talents born of Krypton or gamma ray showers, no gifts garnered through mysterious spider bites or medical experiments gone wrong. He's a self-made man—fully human, just as we are. He's not all-powerful. He's not, as we shall see, altogether good. He is a product of our fallen world even as he strives to rise above it. He holds the seed of God's perfect creation, and yet that seed is embedded in the dirt of tragedy, temptation, sin, and corruption.

And he knows it.

"Deep down, Clark's essentially a good person," Batman admits of his super pal in the DC Comics saga *Hush*. "And deep down, I'm not."

"You either die a hero, or you live long enough to see yourself become the villain," we're told in *The Dark Knight*. In real life, we've seen countless heroes—athletes, actors, politicians, pastors—fall and crash, and Batman is complex enough, enigmatic enough, damaged enough for us to fear that he could fall too. Batman's weakness isn't kryptonite,

silver, or some otherworldly thing: it's his own, very human nature. And that's part of what makes him so compelling.

Sure, Batman sometimes acts as a savior stand-in. But for the most part, he's not a Messiah figure.

He's us.

HOLY INCONSISTENCIES, BATMAN!

Those of us who have been to Sunday school at least twice (and didn't sneak out during the songs) know at least a little about the character of Jesus—how he is the Son of God who came to Earth as a puny mortal to teach us stuff and save us from, essentially, ourselves. Jesus was both completely God and completely human, and since he was a normal guy (in a sense), he experienced most of what we normal guys and girls do: hunger, thirst, pain, sleepiness, that sort of thing.

But some of the stuff we humans do as just part of being human is, at least to my way of thinking, incompatible with the nature of being God.

Take, for instance, the concept of inconsistency. You can't accuse Jesus of being inconsistent. Granted, he had his moments and moods. He could be angry or gentle or sad or even a little exasperated. But while we might read about him telling stories in one chapter and turning over tables in the next, he was always Jesus, if that makes sense. Nothing he did was ever out of character, outside the mold of who we know Jesus to be.

We, on the other hand, are wildly inconsistent.

Oh, sure, we try to convince ourselves that we know who

we are. We tell our friends that we're this type of guy or not that sort of girl. We tell everyone what great senses of humor we have or how much we care for the poor—traits that we feel get down to the core of what we're all about (or who we'd like to be). And if we're not so sure about who we are, we have a whole slew of personality tests designed to tell us.

For instance, the folks at Myers & Briggs tell me I'm an INFP, which means I'm a shy, artistic, touchy-feely type—the kind of person who might write a book about the spirituality of superheroes. But they'd be shocked if they knew I was nearly thrown out of one of my son's soccer games for getting, shall we say, overly enthusiastic. My math teachers, who knew me as the guy who'd doodle all over my notes, would be surprised to know that I regularly crunch a whole bunch of wonky stats while trying to compile a fantasy football team.

Truth is, I'm not always an INFP. Sometimes I might be a more gregarious ENFP or a more judgmental INFJ, and sometimes I can go totally against my character and do a good impression of an ESTJ. On really bad days, I resemble an ICBM. Sure, we might have an inkling of who we are and how we'll react. Those personality tests can be pretty revealing. But all those Myers-Briggs letters can't convey the whole story, and all the rules and inclinations and character types we set for ourselves are littered with exceptions. I think I have a great sense of humor but sometimes don't get obvious jokes. I run three hours, then grab a Sausage McMuffin at McDonald's.

And we're all like that. The most patient among us can snap at a barista. The most cautious among us sometimes

take up hang gliding. We have more faces than the Rolex factory, more personas than the cast of *Saturday Night Live*. Sometimes it would seem that we're not one person but several—forever flexing from one to the next, changing colors like a Las Vegas fountain.

Batman fits right in with the rest of us. Sometimes he seems hardly the same superhero. One decade he's a dark loner, the next he's a veritable family man, surrounded by batwomen, batgirls, and batpets. In one graphic novel, he's a wreck, torn asunder by compulsion and neurosis. In another, he's a rock, a pillar of goodness and virtue. You're never quite sure what you're going to get with Batman—just like us.

THE MEN IN THE MASKS

Batman's inconsistencies aren't just born of outside influences—the writers, artists, actors, and directors who have all had a hand in shaping the superhero's mythic arc over the years and the demands of the readers and viewers who consume his stories. He's a complex, often contradictory character *within* these various works too—at one turn the billionaire playboy, at another the dark vigilante, at still another a man unsure, seemingly puzzled by who he is and what he's become, still searching for his parents' approval.

"What am I doing, Alfred?" he asks in 1993's *Batman: Mask of the Phantasm*, one of countless times he's turned to his loyal, ever-present valet for advice. Having fallen in love, he's in anguish over whether it's okay to be a masked vigilante *and* a significant other. "This isn't part of the plan!" he says.

It's not the first time Batman has surprised even himself. No wonder we're not always sure of him either. He's an enigma to us—just as, in some ways, we all are to each other.

It's interesting how he sometimes uses his cowl to find a level of consistency in himself. Push back the mask and Bruce Wayne seems lost and unsure. Slip it on and he becomes someone else, more confident in action, more definitive in deed. On the inside maybe Bruce Wayne is not that much removed from a little boy who lost his parents so very long ago. But Batman—the guy Bruce becomes when he's in costume—can't afford to express doubts or insecurity. His mask doesn't just hide his features: it helps define them.

Like Batman, all of us hide behind our masks and use them to help define ourselves for others. We all have secret identities of a sort, hidden behind our smiling social-networking profiles or our happy church faces. They're not lies, really. They're just not the whole truth, because we know that most of the people we encounter day-to-day couldn't handle the truth (or perhaps we couldn't handle giving it to them). Most of us are like those Russian nesting dolls, presenting a slightly different visage to the world depending on which world we're dealing with at the time. The outermost doll isn't a lie: mine still offers part of who I am, but it's not *all* of who I am. As I get closer to people, the nesting dolls open and the masks change. But it's a rare person whom I allow to see what's at my core: my innermost thoughts and fears, my dreams and desires, my pettiness and peevishness. Most of us know that if we threw ourselves open to the whole world, what would

be revealed isn't always that attractive. It can be silly or ugly or off-putting, and so we only shed our masks a bit at a time.

The masks we wear aren't lies. They are, in a strange way, a critical part of who we are. Batman's not unusual in wearing one: his is just a little more obvious.

In Batman's case, though, it's harder to determine what his "mask" really is—and perhaps *he's* not even completely sure. He wears one when making the rounds in Gotham to bring down the bad guys. But there's another he wears, far more like the ones we show people at work or school or at the latest party: his Bruce Wayne mask, the playboy billionaire visage that he pastes on for dinners and charity balls. Lots of folks would argue that Bruce hides behind his perfectly coiffed hair and ever-easy smile far more than Batman does underneath his cowl.

In the ultra-creepy graphic novel *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth*, the Dark Knight finds himself virtually imprisoned in Gotham City's most notorious locale for the criminally insane—at the mercy of the madmen he put there. Unconscious, Batman is momentarily helpless, and Arkham's inmates—led by Batman's personal demon, the Joker—can pretty much have their way with him.

"I say we take off his mask," says one loon in the gloom. "I want to see his *real* face."

"Oh, don't be so predictable!" Joker says. "That *is* his real face."

That's one of the interesting things about Gotham: it can be difficult to figure out just what constitutes a mask. It's not just Batman who wears one.

In *Batman Begins*, who is the real Dr. Crane: the apparently mild-mannered psychiatrist or the nightmare called Scarecrow? What's the true face of Two-Face in *The Dark Knight*? And what about the Joker's ghastly white face? Is that a mask? Is that who he truly is?

The answer to these questions may be yes, oddly enough. Gotham City is a place where masks reveal as much as they obscure—perhaps not unlike our own. And using this curiously paradoxical construct, it's satisfying to me that Joker's two most recent cinematic appearances give us two opposite, and yet somehow complementary, looks at his unforgettable visage.

In Tim Burton's 1989 film *Batman*, the Joker (played by Jack Nicholson) is literally a white-faced, green-haired freak, made that way through an unfortunate chemical accident. To appear more human, he must wear flesh-colored makeup. Nearly twenty years later, Christopher Nolan's Joker (Heath Ledger) in *The Dark Knight* achieves his trademark look *through* makeup—plastering his face with white greasepaint and dyeing his hair green. In the first version, Joker becomes a monster who hides behind a mask; in the second, he uses a mask not to hide but to reveal his true nature, his inner self. These opposing views of the clown's face point to a certain push-pull found in our own natures: how we can be corrupted both from without and within, how through practice we hide what we are, and how we become what we pretend to be.

All of which makes me wonder: if our souls had faces—if our souls *were* our faces—what would we look like?

THE DARK OF THE KNIGHT

When my son, Colin, was about four years old, someone asked him if he was scared of the dark.

"No," he said thoughtfully. "It's the stuff *in* the dark I'm scared of."

We live in fear of the dark not because of what it is but because of what it hides. As children, we shone flashlights under our beds to dispel the creatures lurking there. As adults, we flick on lamps to better see where to walk, sit, or stand. We grow uncomfortable when we sit in the dark, surrounded by the unknown and unknowable.

Batman gets all that. In Gotham City, darkness is the refuge of monsters. It's the cover under which its thugs and thieves go to work, where gangsters and murderers and costumed villains come out to play. There's a lot to be scared of there, in the dark. And that is why Batman would tell you he's out there too: to give Gotham's worst something *they* should fear for a change. For crooks and criminals, *Batman* is what goes bump in the night.

But it's more than that. There's something inherently dark about Batman, too—something beyond his co-opting darkness for a lighter purpose or piecing together a mythos of fear to give evildoers something to be afraid of. Batman creators Bob Kane and Bill Finger imagined him in 1939 as a threatening, fearsome vigilante, despised by crooks and cops alike. And after so many years, he's never completely lost that sense of shadow. In Christopher Nolan's iteration of the character, that sense of darkness is as strong as ever. The films toy with

the character's near-schizophrenic duality—his masks upon masks—and suggest at times that the gulf between the superhero and the villains he fights isn't all that broad.

"Don't talk like one of them," the Joker tells Batman in *The Dark Knight*. "You're not, even if you'd like to be. To them, you're just a freak . . . like me!"

"What you really fear is inside yourself," Henri Ducard, a mentor of sorts to Bruce Wayne in *Batman Begins*, says. "You fear your own power. You fear your anger, the drive to do great or terrible things."

"It's the stuff *in* the dark I'm scared of," my son says.

Perhaps we're all a little like that. We fear the darkness inside ourselves. Our anger. Our jealousy. Our desires. Our hatred. I wonder sometimes if the reason why some of us hate to be still or alone is that in the quiet of our own thoughts we find ourselves facing the darkness within—unmasked, inconsistent with the person we wish to be. We may tell ourselves that we're "good people," kind and honest and decent. And most of the time it may be true. But in the darkness, we know—we *know*—that it's not. We know it's a mask.

And maybe that's one of the elements that attracts us to Batman.

In most superhero stories, the line between good and evil, the gulf between light and darkness, is clearly defined. On one side of the line you have the good guys, the caped wonders who protect innocent civilians from those on the opposite side, the evil ones, the villains, the ugly "other." It's us versus them, and there's no question that we're the guys wearing the white hats. There's something comforting

about that narrative, which is a big reason why we see so many iterations of it.

But there's a part of us, maybe a small, nagging, unpleasant part, that treats those stories with suspicion. We know the line is not that bright; the gulf between "us" and "them" is not that wide. We feel not just the hero inside us but the villain . . . the darkness.

Batman, a guy who doesn't just wear a black hat, but one with pointed, horn-like ears, is a representation of our own selves, a strange, graphic allegory of the soul, with Gotham City a microcosm of the fragile, fallen world through which we struggle to make our way. Gotham itself feels *bad*—Old Testament bad. We can catch a glimpse of ancient Sodom or Samaria when we see its streets, and we feel its sin press on us with an almost physical presence. Batman, as we're told in *The Dark Knight*, isn't a perfect savior for the city; he's the one it "deserves," in all his imperfection. He walks perilously close to the line.

And yet there's something inside the guy that sets him apart. He may look bad, but it's not what he looks like that matters. It's what he does, and what he stands for, that counts.

How curiously biblical Batman is in this way. He's not much like Superman, but he is something like Moses, David, and Peter. The Bible doesn't sugarcoat our heroes for us or tell us they're anything but pretty sorry, flawed folks. And yet God takes them and makes them special, even great, just as he does with us. God takes badness and makes it good. He takes shadow and shines a light—if not on it, at least in it. He transforms us not from the outside, but from within.

Nothing is too sooty for his cleansing hand. "For once you were full of darkness, but now you have light from the Lord," says Ephesians 5:8. "So live as people of light!"

Is it surprising, then, that Batman would see some light and hope in Gotham as well? The place may be bad, filled with all manner of corruption, but there's goodness to be found underneath the grime. It isn't Sodom, without even ten righteous people. It can still be saved. It can still be redeemed—if only someone would care enough to help the cause along. Someone with a little faith.

LOOKING FOR THE LIGHT

If you've been involved with Christianity for any length of time, you've met Christians who don't seem Christian at all. Maybe they raise their hands in church or say the right things in youth group, but you'd never know they were children of light by the way they behave outside of church.

But have you ever met atheists or agnostics or people who are thoroughly secular who didn't seem like they were following their *own* faith (or lack thereof) either?

I have. I've known people who say they don't believe in God—maybe even *can't* believe in him—but act as if they do. And they go beyond just generally adhering to Judeo-Christian ethics or throwing some walk-around money into the Salvation Army kettle at Christmas. There's nothing that says atheists who act like atheists can't also be nice, kind, and good people. But some I've met, it's as if they're following

an unsounded call, as if they sense the hand of God on their shoulder but can't or won't give it a name.

It's a curious thing, but I think I understand it. God still loves us and cares for us even if we don't know him or love him back. Just because we shut our eyes to the light doesn't mean it leaves us or that we might not somehow see it a little, even against the walls of our eyelids.

"A man can no more diminish God's glory by refusing to worship Him than a lunatic can put out the sun by scribbling the word 'darkness' on the walls of his cell," writes C. S. Lewis in *The Problem of Pain*. "But God wills our good, and our good is to love Him . . . and to love Him we must know Him: and if we know Him, we shall in fact fall on our faces. If we do not, that only shows that what we are trying to love is not yet God—though it may be the nearest approximation to God which our thought and fantasy can attain."

Which makes me wonder whether Christians who don't act like Christians and unbelievers who act like they believe may be wandering down parallel roads on the way to faith. In both cases, they're craving to do what they were built to do; they want to worship, but they can't quite get there yet.

I think Batman is a little like that—either a nominal Christian who might not fully understand who he's following or a principled agnostic who somehow senses the call of God.

See, we don't really know what Batman believes. We don't see him go to church in the comics, and it seems unlikely he'd be the type to attend a Bible study. When the folks at Adherents.com tried to figure out what sort of faith various

superheroes practiced, they concluded that Batman was probably a lapsed Catholic or disgruntled Episcopalian. DC author Chuck Dixon personally believes he's Catholic. "No Protestant ever suffered guilt the way Bruce does," Dixon writes. But Batman's not one to prattle on about his faith, and when the subject does come up, his response is often inconsistent.

Batman's faith is dependent on who might be telling his story that particular day. At times, he professes incredulity to the very concept of God, and given his dour practicality and stoic adherence to empirical evidence, that makes narrative sense. At other times, though, we see him praying. And when we think about the Dark Knight's unshakable sense of what's right and wrong, when we see his commitment to a justice that goes well beyond the law, and when we sometimes see manifested in him a curious and welcome form of grace, none of which seems consistent through a philosophy built around pragmatism and empiricism alone, a religious way of thinking also seems to fit. While Batman seems to have taken a more agnostic turn over the last several years, there's no getting around the fact that in the comics, Bruce might never have become Batman had he not bowed his head in the candlelight and prayed—a part of the Batman narrative we'll deal with at greater length in the next chapter.

As you read this book, I recommend you look at Batman not as a superhero saint, but rather as an unwitting guide. He's a creature of darkness in search of the light. He's no Messiah. He's not, perhaps, even a Christian. And yet when we watch him, there are unmistakable impulses within him that can have no other source than God—even if he or his

authors don't fully understand that source. Who except one touched by God so fully acknowledges the darkness within himself? Who except one kissed by the Almighty rejects his own desires so thoroughly for the betterment of others? What idiot would sacrifice so much night after night without sensing a call?

Batman is no lunatic. He is no villain. He is a hero, pressed into service by a source he may be only dimly aware of. He believes in goodness even if he doesn't call it God. Perhaps he's like the disciple Thomas, who heard the call to follow, but didn't quite understand who he was really following.

But because Batman perhaps doesn't perfectly understand his calling or the implications thereof, he can sometimes get a little lost. He can grow confused in his role and sometimes his values can get a little scrambled. He is prone, like most of us can be at times, to place his trust in the wrong things and his faith in the wrong people. We all lose sight of God and sometimes chase after the nearest approximation. And sometimes he literally follows the wrong guy.

"I BELIEVE IN HARVEY DENT"

In *The Dark Knight*, Bruce Wayne thinks he's found his savior—a crusading district attorney by the name of Harvey Dent.

"We all know you're Gotham's white knight," Jim Gordon tells Dent, and it would seem to be true. Winning the district attorney job behind the slogan "I Believe in Harvey Dent," he carries an explicit mandate to clean up the city. He plays

by the rules in the light of day and does so in a coat and tie, not a cowl and cape. He's not afraid to show his face, and in the corrupted world of Gotham City, that makes Harvey a tough hombre indeed.

But if we've learned anything through Christopher Nolan's first two Gotham City sojourns, it's that there are few people on the public dole to be trusted. Every now and then we hear hints that perhaps Harvey's not as pure and virtuous as we've been led to believe. Jim Gordon lets slip that some cops have even given him a rather unfortunate nickname—"Harvey Two-Face," we learn later.

But Bruce Wayne doesn't see that side of the DA and takes Harvey at face value.

"You know that day that you once told me about, when Gotham would no longer need Batman?" he tells Rachel Dawes, his oldest friend and one of the few people who knows who's under the cowl. "It's coming. . . . It's happening now. Harvey is that hero. He locked up half of the city's criminals, and he did it without wearing a mask. Gotham needs a hero with a face."

We all need that hero, someone to protect us, to save us from our sinful world, from our sinful selves. Bruce Wayne knows that Batman—as tough and cool as he is—can't be that hero. He knows his own heart too well. And he, like the rest of Gotham, longs for someone without blemish, unstained by the muck and filth of the city. He doesn't seem to understand that even a good man or a great man is still also a *hu*man. Humans don't come without blemish. And sometimes our heroes let us down.

Listen to the language Batman uses when talking about Gotham's supposed white knight. Bruce Wayne didn't just grow to like Harvey Dent or decide to support Harvey Dent. "I *believe* in Harvey Dent," he says, echoing the DA's own slogan. He christens the politician as Gotham's duly elected savior, pinning the city's hopes—and his own—on Harvey's broad shoulders. Dent is cast as the city's messiah, a larger-than-life figure who will rescue Gotham from evil and turn it into a shining city on a hill.

But Harvey, as anyone who has seen *The Dark Knight* knows, is not an unspoiled Christ figure, incorruptible and pure. To paraphrase the Joker, he is only as good as circumstances allow him to be. Sure, Harvey says that he knew the risks . . . but he didn't know the half of it.

The Joker kidnaps Harvey and his main squeeze, Rachel Dawes, imprisoning them in gasoline-filled warehouses on opposite sides of town. But while Harvey's prepared to die, he's not prepared to live. So when Batman pulls him from the warehouse, with Rachel instead serving as the Joker's sacrificial lamb, something snaps. Harvey survives, grotesquely scarred on the inside and out, becoming the "Two-Face" his critics always said he was. He's no hero: he's as two-faced as the rest of us can be—a creature lost and alone and very, very angry. "It's not fair!" we can practically hear him say. "It doesn't make sense! What twisted, godforsaken world would allow this?" It's the stuff of Greek tragedy, and Harvey's fall, for all the millions the movie earned, makes *The Dark Knight* a hard film to watch.

"The Joker chose me!" Harvey hollers, the left side of his face charred and torn.

"Because you were the best of us," Batman tells him. "He wanted to prove that even someone as good as you could fall."

"And he was right," Harvey says.

I wonder if in that moment Batman feels Harvey's fall almost as keenly as Harvey does himself. After all, Batman believed in him. Bruce had wanted him to be the hero Gotham needed. But instead, Harvey Dent becomes a villain. Instead of a white knight, he's a killer, ugly, misshapen, unhinged from any strictures of normalcy or morality. Batman believed in Harvey, and when Harvey turned Two-Face, Batman's own hopes for a savior crumbled.

POLEAXING THE PEDESTALS

I'd argue that no one deserves our full trust. As a species, we're just not that trustworthy. We look for saviors in people who, when push comes to shove, are in just as great a need of saving as we are.

We hear about fallen saviors every day of the week. Priests, politicians, and celebrities topple off the pillars we put them on in spectacular fashion, their sins and misdeeds spread across news and gossip sites for all the world to see and pass judgment. When I was a religion reporter in Colorado Springs, I had the opportunity to get to know dozens of spiritual leaders, and when I had to write about how some of them fell, maybe I felt a little of Batman's pain. These were people I liked and who were doing some great work in the community. But they had problems and issues, and those sins don't always stay hidden. Reactions to these fallen

saviors were mixed, naturally. Some who followed these people decided to follow them still, denying most or all of what they were accused of. Others—often those standing on the outside—gleefully helped pull them down. Still others were heartbroken, their faith momentarily adrift: when the man who led you to God proves to be a hypocrite, it can understandably do funny things to your belief structure. If a pastor preaches fidelity and we find out he's having an affair, we can wonder whether the rest is also a big sham.

I reported on it all as fairly and objectively as I knew how. But inside, I hurt a little. And I remembered what my own pastor said in church one night: if a news crew showed up at the door of any of our souls, they'd find a juicy story there, too.

We've all been disappointed by those around us. We've all been disappointed in ourselves. We can be creatures of darkness, and when we find light in one another, it's often light of a flickering sort, prone to warble and wave with each gust of wind. So the light we see in even our heroes—even Batman—cannot be fully trusted. But holding mere candles in the darkness doesn't negate the sunlight overhead.

Batman chose the wrong savior—a corruptible DA, not the incorruptible Adonai. And yet he has not stopped believing. His faith in Harvey was misplaced, but he hasn't lost sight of the light Harvey reflected. He can't believe in Harvey Dent, but he can believe, as Harvey once did, that Gotham can be saved. And perhaps lodged somewhere in Batman's call, in his faith, in his desire for goodness and justice, there's a hint of the true Savior.

"The night is darkest just before the dawn," Harvey says before his fall. "And I promise you, the dawn is coming."

Batman lives in darkness. In some ways he is a creature of darkness. And like many of us, he can't quite get a handle on the coming sun. He's a little lost, a little alone, a little confused. And yet he has hope, and even faith of a sort—faith in a future that won't be corrupted, that won't be stained. He believes the dawn is coming . . . and that when it does, it will sweep away not just the city's shadows but his own.

Batman is on a walk of faith, following a voice to his ultimate purpose. His walk doesn't necessarily parallel our own, but it's instructive nonetheless. He is, like we are, following a worthy call—his to serve Gotham, ours to serve God and his people. And Batman shows us just how difficult and rewarding following that call can be.

When did Batman first hear that call? When did Bruce Wayne take his first steps toward his cape and cowl? It didn't come in earthquake or fire or even a still, small voice. It came with the tug of a trigger, the crack of a gun. It came with the sound of flight, the sound of a fall, the sound of an awful, deathly quiet. It came on the heels of a sob.

Turn the page and read on. It's time to learn how Batman was born.