

Edna E. Mode, the fabulous tailor to the Superhero elite in the movie *The Incredibles*, has one rule governing her fashion-forward designs: no capes. She's been in the business awhile, you see, and she's learned a thing or two about the intersection of form and function in the highly demanding wear and tear work of superheroing. A Super Suit is practical in every way imaginable to meet the modern Supers' needs. Fireproof, bulletproof, machine washable! Suited to each individual hero, the gear comes in any color, size, or power-complement. But absolutely no capes. Edna's seen a thing or two. Remember Thunderhead? "All was well, another day saved, when his cape snagged on a missile fin! Stratogale, cape caught in a jet turbine. Metaman, express elevator. Dynaguy, snagged on takeoff. Splashdown, sucked into a vortex. No capes!" This is quite a shift in the sartorial world of superheroes. We know what it takes to make a superhero look like a superhero. They need tights, big muscles, good hair, and capes. Think about it. Batman? Cape. Robin? Cape. Thor? Cape. Spawn, Dr. Strange, Dr. Doom, Magneto (some villains, I know), Storm, Captain Marvel, Superman! It's capes! Capes all the way down!

Now, a cape signifies more than just the ability to fly or disappear or buy your way onto the superhero catwalk. A cape is dynamic. It flows in the wind for a dramatic backdrop. It conceals your identity and protects you from all sorts of hazards. It makes you look bigger, which, for a hero like the undersized Darkwing Duck, goes a long way. But the cape also says something about power. Maybe it's a ruse or a less-than-subtle reminder, but when we see people wearing capes, we know they have power. Well, maybe not all the time. A random guy in a cape walking down Madison Street isn't likely to evoke the same impression as Batman blasting through a wall. Assuming a superhero universe, though, capes convey power. The man or woman standing alone in a cape with the sun rising in the background? That's the one you want to follow. The man or woman standing alone in a cape with the world burning in the background? That's the one to fear.

Now, capes look cool. I mean, in a comic book kind of way, capes look cool. But they didn't originate with Superman's aerial feats of heroism. People have been wearing something like capes for a long time. And it was powerful people, especially powerful men as history would have it, powerful people wore these capes to signify who they were. A cape paired with a sword provided both attack and defense for a well-equipped musketeer. Think "Zorro." A variation, the cloak and dagger, did the same for spies and assassins. The fur-lined red robes of kings and queens denoted wealth and power, while also keeping the royals warm in those drafty Northern European castles. Even the church had its fair share of capes, two that still hold on today. One is the cappa, a heavy, black cloak primarily used at graveside services in nasty weather, and the other is the cope, essentially an ornate riding cloak used in processions. Both are very fancy, and both have their roots in garments worn by the elites of the Roman empire. The roots of the cape go further back, still. Sure, sometimes people wore something like a poncho to ward off the cold and damp, but, let's be honest, a poncho lacks the majesty and grandeur of a cape.

Enter the mantle, a large piece of cloth, usually wool, denoting authority given by God. Prophets wore these. Elijah wore one. And Elijah's mantle is fascinating, because just like Elijah, this mantle gets in the way of God some days and points to God on others. When Elijah stands at the mouth of the cave, fleeing the villainous Jezebel, he hides his eyes from the sight of God before him, raising the mantle to cover his face. And he walks away, apparently unfazed by the encounter. Sometimes the cape got in the way. But sometimes that same symbol, that mantle, conveyed power beyond imagining. Approaching the rushing Jordan, Elijah smacks his cape on the water's edge, and a path of dry land appears. God's mastery over water, from Creation to Moses

and now to Elijah, dramatized by a flash of the cape. And when Elijah ascends and tosses his mantle down to his successor, Elisha stands there, stunned to receive this conduit of God's power. Like a kid who's just witnessed his first superhero, he goes straight to the river to see if he can pull off the wonders he's seen. With a smack of fabric, the waters part, and Elisha smirks. "The cape's still got it."

This is where Edna E. Mode, the superhero fashionista, comes in. She knows it's not about the cape. The power's not in the cape, it's in the hero themselves. After all, Superman still flies even when his cape is in tatters. In the church, we have a tendency to get caught up in the trappings. Let me rephrase that. In the church, *I* have a tendency to get caught up in the trappings. Copes and cappas, vestments and collars, tall echoing buildings with stunning organs -- this stuff conveys power, authority. God must be here, right, because who else has ceilings this high? And none of that was an accident. Our church is meant to be grand, because it points to something magnificent. But what happens when we do things for the sake of grandeur alone? When God looks in on us, is the sun rising at our backs or the world burning at our feet? Our capes can become a hindrance, our focus on God shifted to the shiny chalice rather than the Blood of Christ within. That's the rub. Because I kind of like these trappings, the shiny chalices and the beautiful vestments are, well, inspiring. They do point my heart and mind toward something greater, but I pray that that "something greater" is God.

I have to disagree with Edna E. Mode, or rather, nuance her NO CAPES mindset. Because the church at its best uses what we have received to the glory of God. Our dramatic red doors stand open on the hottest of Sundays. Our ornate windows echo the voices of worship and praise. Our people minister to the world in more ways than anyone in this pulpit will ever know. The cape doesn't make the hero; the trappings don't make the church. But they do signal to the world that there is a power at work here, a power greater than any human, a power standing ready to serve. And in that world full of hurt, injustice, politicking, and frustration, let us never forget who it is we serve. We serve God, capes or no capes, we serve God.