

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, August 2, 2009, Pentecost 9, dedicated to Daniel Robert Sitler Ahrens, whose creative energy and “super” vision is boundless, and always to the glory of God!

“Batman and Moses”

Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15

**(Part I of III in the sermon series
“Superheroes of the Faith”)**

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Today we begin the three-part sermon series “Superheroes of the Faith.” Our first characters are Batman and Moses. Batman is a very “dark” superhero. The comparisons to Moses were not easy or simple to make. I hope you gain some knowledge and insights into the process.
Rev. Ahrens

You will not be able to identify the location of the burning bush on Mt. Horeb. Yet, we all know that from the burning bush, which was not consumed by fire, God summoned a middle-aged man named Moses to save God’s chosen people. After much resistance, Moses followed his call and saved his people.

You will also not be able to find Gotham City on a map. Yet we also know that from the highest rooftop in Gotham, when the city’s greatest crime fighter was needed to solve the most difficult riddles and track down the most violent jokers in Crime Ally, a beam went out

across the night sky summoning help from the Batman. Like a lighthouse sending its sign of warning from the coastline, Commissioner Gordon's Bat signal marshaled the power of Batman – and he answered the call.

Moses and Batman – two archetypal heroes for all time. Both Batman and Moses are heroic figures who have encouraged people and given hope in challenging times and situations to generations of believers young and old.

In May 1939, in another bleak and difficult time in American and world history, artist Bob Kane and writer Bill Finger presented “Batman” for the first time (in Detective Comics #27 from DC Comics). From the beginning, Batman's secret identity was **Bruce Wayne** – drawn from the Scottish patriot Robert **Bruce** and the American patriot, Mad Anthony **Wayne**. By day, Bruce Wayne was a billionaire, playboy, industrialist and philanthropist. By night, this “Dark Knight” or “Caped Crusader” swooped down from rooftops, crushing his opponents with force and thunder.

Wayne's story began as a young child. Having watched his parents robbed and murdered in front of him in Crime Alley for a few dollars, the orphaned Bruce Wayne set out on a mission to become strong enough and tough enough to fight crime. He claimed the crime fighting identity of a “Bat-man” (which is an interesting twist in itself since he had a fear of bats). This young hero was driven to stop crime and end the murder and mayhem on the streets of Gotham. From his bat cave built under Wayne Mansion, he struck out fearlessly creating fear in the process.

His story continues today! As opposed to Superman's magnificent power and super human strength displayed out in the open – mostly in broad daylight – Batman is a super hero who strikes at night as a master of sleuth and science. He is a detective who researches his foes and then uses gadgets and gizmos in his attack. In absolute darkness he strikes fear into criminals (and police and often citizens), combating, but never killing, his opponents.

In his lifework on world religions, formative myths and hero worship, comparative anthropologist, Joseph Campbell shed much light on the shape and power of our heroes and our hero worship. Not only do all cultures and all religions have hero myths, but Campbell discovered that they are surprisingly similar. He explained it this way: “There is but one archetypal mythic hero whose life has been replicated in many lands by many, many people.”

This hero fights to save or preserve a particular culture, often in his return to that culture through some saving knowledge, power or wisdom. The hero is never created in a vacuum. Power alone doesn't make a hero. Service and sacrifice do. As Campbell told Bill Moyers in their series *The Power of Myth* on PBS, “A hero is someone who has given his or her life to something bigger than oneself.” (quoted in *Holy Superheroes!*, by Greg Garrett, Pinon Press, Colorado Springs, 2005, pps. 28 and 30).

The basic shape of the archetypal hero story is simple.

It begins with the character in the Ordinary World, everyday life. The character is then presented with some challenge, a Call to Adventure, a call that is sometimes refused. And finally accepting that call to heroism, the character must cross the threshold between the Ordinary World and the World of Adventure, through which he or she will face trials, adventures and the intervention of enemies and allies.

The hero must muster enough courage to approach the inner sanctum of the enemy and undergo an ordeal that leads to a reward of some sort. The hero must then bring the reward back to society, but not without first facing the ultimate test of worth, which sometimes brings figurative or literal death to the character before a sort of resurrection occurs. It is in the ultimate sacrifice that the hero is born and raised to a new status within the culture. (paraphrased from *Ibid*, p. 31).

If this story sounds familiar, it parallels the life stories of many

great heroic men and women. We see it in stories of the apostle Paul, the Buddha, Joan of Arc, Martin Luther King, Jr., Harriet Tubman and Nelson Mandela – to name a few. Clearly the life, death and resurrection of Jesus conforms to the powerful mythical story pattern.

We see it as well in Moses' story. Moses is one of the greatest archetypal heroes of all faith and all time. Nobel Peace Prize winner and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel refers to Moses as the greatest religious leader of all time because of the power, length and breath of his leadership – all of which is deeply rooted in God.

Moses is born a liberator. While Pharaoh's ordering the massacre of all newborn Jewish males, Moses is placed in the bulrushes by his sister Miriam, and "discovered" by Pharaoh's daughter, who recognizes him as a Hebrew child, but sees to it he is raised as an Egyptian prince.

As a young man, Moses comes upon an Egyptian soldier beating a Jewish slave. He intervenes, saving the slave and killing the soldier. He is recognized by the Jews as a ruler of Egypt who has killed another Egyptian. Pharaoh seeks him and plans to kill him. Moses flees from Egypt to Midian where he joins the family of Reuel, a Midianite priest. In time, he marries Reuel's daughter Zipporah and settles down to a hidden and anonymous life far from Egypt.

Meanwhile back in Egypt, the Pharaoh dies and God hears the moans of his people in travail. And God, remembering his covenant with Abraham, "takes notice" (the passage tells us). God chooses to send a strong deliverer for his people. From the center of the burning bush, God calls Moses to save the Jews from slavery. With nothing but a staff, the promises of God and a faith tested by fire, Moses returns to Egypt and confronts Pharaoh (his brother by adoption).

Ten plagues later – including the 10th that killed the firstborn males of each Egyptian household by the angel of the Lord – Pharaoh sends all the Jews out of Egypt, until he changes his mind and chases

after them! Assisted by his understudy Aaron, Moses leads the people in a narrow escape through the Sea of Reeds as Pharaoh's chariots sink into the water while in hot pursuit.

Having received the 10 Commands and having led the people through 40 years of journey in the desert, Moses delivers the people of God to the Promised Land. In the end, Moses fails to reach the Land of Promise. With his dying breath, he passes on these words from God, "I lay before you good and evil, life and death – choose life so that you and the generations to follow may live!" On the edge of promise, he dies while his people cross over to freedom! He is buried on Egypt's side of the Jordan River in an unmarked grave. To this day he is revered as the greatest liberator of the Jewish people.

So many comparisons arise between Moses and Batman. Both are raised as virtual orphans. Both are physically and spiritually powerful. Both are deeply moral and convicted to do good and strike out against evil – defending their own people in the process. Both leave their home and develop their strength and skills in a foreign land returning to save the innocents living under violent and often demonic rulers or villains. Both have an understudies – Batman has Robin; Moses has Aaron. Both are willing to sacrifice their lives for what is right and just. Both generate great hope but also great fear.

Each has an opponent in the struggle for justice. For Batman, his archenemy is the Joker. For Moses, it is Pharaoh. Let's look at these two figures as well. Both of them are corrupt and lead by creating chaos for a people living in fear. It is chaos and evil that Batman and Moses oppose. Both Batman and Moses have tried, time and time again, to appeal to their adversaries to help them and to save them, but they reject their offers and continue in their downward spiral. Moses appeals to Pharaoh before bringing deadly plagues to his doorstep. Similarly, Batman offers to help the Joker turn from his ways and change. In the comic, *The Killing Joke*, Batman reaches out to the Joker. Joker laughs in his face and declares, "I wish I could, but I can't change now. Not after everything that's happened, everything I've done." In the end, neither of our great archetypal

heroes are able to change their archenemies.

In some sense, neither is able to change the ways of their own people. Both are loved and feared when they are leading their people. Exodus 16 is an example of this. Moses saves the people and then they complain about life being harder in the wilderness than in slavery. In Egypt they groaned in pain. Now they complain about freedom's troubles. Batman is often vilified by the people of Gotham for being too hard on the criminals. Each faces a lack of understanding from those they save. This too is often the plight of archetypal heroes – one that causes such internal pain – that only God can ultimately care for the brokenness our heroes experience in their battle for justice.

Exploring the superheroes is important. So many young men like my son are prolific readers of the comics and graphic novels. This medium teaches so much about the conflict of good and evil; the times in which we live; moral values and ethics; and how and what to do “right by people.” One of my friends, Nicole Duncan-Smith, is a comic book publisher in New York City. Each week she goes into the toughest schools in Brooklyn and teaches comic books to the all ages of boys and young men. Studies have shown that young men are falling behind in reading and dropping out of school at increasingly alarming rates.

However, if they read, they succeed. In many places, comic books and graphic novels filled with action, and heroes and villains and color, are the one thing that has them reading.

Nicole is a Spellman College graduate. She tells me, “I have seen non-readers and slow readers turn into college bound students through comic books and graphic novels. This medium makes sense to them. It is saving their lives.”

We all need heroes. To learn morals and values for life and living is essential. Following Jesus is our best and brightest pathway. If Bible stories can give us models to follow, all the better! But, if the

archetypal mythic heroes fly through the sky to save people, I applaud them and hope they land upright!

Next week, we will look deeper into the relationship between the archenemies, the chaos they create and the response of the heroes whom they battle. We will explore the complexities of these relationships.