

*A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Pentecost 11, August 16, 2009, dedicated to the memory of Jerome Dailey on his birthday, to the family of Paul Herreid at this time of his death, and always to the glory of God!*

## **“Jesus and Superman”**

***I Kings 2:10-12, 3:3-14, Luke 24:1-12***

***(Part III 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 of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Long ago, far from this mortal world, a wise and powerful father made a fateful decision to send his only son to a backward planet. There, he was raised by an earthly mother and father, exhibiting signs of supernatural powers that he exhibited as his birthright. When he reached adulthood, he set out on his mission: the salvation of the people of Earth.

He stepped forward, performing miracles, saving lives, and making it clear that he was someone special, someone God-like. The year when this savior began his ministry was not 25 A.D., but 1938. His name, despite logical confusion, was not Jesus. It was Kal-El. You probably know him better as “Superman.” (drawn from *Holy Superheroes*, Greg Garrett, Pinon Press, 2005, p. 39)

Superman, Krypton's favorite son, was actually a Buckeye. Created by the sons of Jewish immigrants, east Cleveland teen-agers Joe Shuster and Jerry Siegel devised Superman as a super-powered hero who opposed the forces of evil and stood for truth, justice and the American way.

He was the ultimate archetypal hero – able to leap tall buildings at a single bound, fly faster than the speed of light, stop bullets and locomotives with his bare hands, and outrun the fastest creatures. He was the amalgamation of every legend – Moses, Icarus, Zeus and Jesus Christ all rolled up and wrapped inside an American flag. Among superheroes, Superman is the ultimate superhero. Some say Superman is the greatest fictional character of all time.

When Siegel and Schuster created Superman, they changed the face of American popular culture. Although there had been plenty of heroes before him, when Superman appeared on the scene, he had the power to take on a fallen world. Writer and cartoonist Jules Feiffer has said of pre-Superman comics that the heroes not only weren't as interesting as the villains, but they were no match for them. They all sent the message that nice guys finish last. Feiffer writes, "Villains . . . were miles ahead. Someone with a 'call' was needed to fight them." (Jules Feiffer, *The Great Comic Book Heroes*, Fantagraphics, 2003, pp. 8-9).

Remember the times in which Superman arrived. It was the late 1930s, America was stuck in the Great Depression, the Japanese were rattling their swords, Stalin was reigning terror upon Russia, Hitler was marching and tightening his grip on the throat of Europe and disturbing stories were coming back from the Jews of Europe about the virulent anti-Semitism they were encountering as Hitler's "final solution" was beginning to take hold.

Is it any wonder that two teen-age Jewish boys would create a mythic character to save the world? In troubling times, Jews had summoned the power of the Golem in eastern Europe. Coming from the Jews of Prague, the Golem was a super strong creature made of clay and called forth to assail the powers of evil. He was the great protector who drew his breath from God. He was an invincible hero.

Siegel and Schuster named their hero Kal-El. Similar to “Emanuel,” or “God With Us,” “the Chosen One” and “the Messiah,” “Kal-El” is translated from the Hebrew as “all that is God.” Even coming from the Planet Krypton, those are big shoes to fill.

But that is not the only allusion to their Jewish roots. Kal-El is a refugee, one of the only survivors of the Diaspora from his own planet. As a baby he is placed in a spaceship and shot into orbit and sent to a farm in Kansas on Earth. Reminiscent of Moses floating to safety on the River Nile, Kal-El is sent to a foreign land where he is raised among people he resembles. Although he is raised as a farm boy named Clark Kent, clearly he is different from his parents and the people of Smallville.

At first, his powers are not superhuman. His strength grows through the years from childhood to adulthood. He actually gains strength from the sun (it turns out he is semi-solar powered).

By February 1940, in *Look* magazine, Superman appeared in a comic entitled, “*What if Superman Ended the War?*” The comic begins by saying, here is “Superman, Savior of the helpless and oppressed.” It ends with him capturing both Hitler and Stalin, taking them to the League of Nations where they are tried as war criminals and placed in prison. France is liberated. The Russians are a free people. Germany has a new start and the war is ended – in only a few frames of the comics! Mind you, this all happens one year before Pearl Harbor and almost 4½ years before “D-Day.” If only . . .

Superman evolves through the years. Remember there are now well over 700 comic book depictions dedicated to the “Man of Steel” alone. Since 1938, Superman has died at the hands of the creature called “Doomsday.” He came back to life in Alan Moore’s *Superman: Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow?* In Moore’s story, Captain Marvel and Supergirl rip open the vault and it is empty. He is gone.

While lots of comic book villains come back to life (no good villain can stay dead for long!), the physical resurrection of a comic hero is extremely rare. Along that line, I heard a recent NPR radio interview with Neil Gaiman (one of the all-time great comic book writers and now a filmmaker). He was speaking of Batman coming back. Gaiman said, “It is not easy to resurrect a superhero. It takes a courageous writer to do so. If you don’t have the strength to bring a hero back from the dead, don’t start. If you do, God bless you!”

To make a one-to-one correspondence of Clark Kent and Jesus of Nazareth has its problems (not unlike the ones I encountered two weeks ago comparing Moses and Batman). Nevertheless, we can learn some lessons from Superman and find parallels to Jesus.

**We learn a lot about the power of incarnation.** Superman is a great combination of superhuman strength and human spirit. As Clark Kent he is kind, soft-spoken, intelligent and creative. As a reporter for the *Daily Planet*, Clark Kent actually carries on the family tradition of Silas Kent, an abolitionist and founder and publisher of the Lawrence, Kansas, daily newspaper. He is very human in the way he lives and sees himself in relation to other people. He not only is a model of power and strength, but also of decency and moral authority. His first love, Lana Lang muses early on, “To understand the man in the cape who could fly – all I needed to know was Clark.”

Jesus is the perfect combination of divine power and human goodness. He is the incarnation as Savior – equally God and human, “God from God, light from light, true God from true God” - one with the Father, begotten, not made, one for the ages. In resurrection, Jesus becomes even more of who he was before he died. His presence in the garden with Mary on Easter Sunday is one in which she recognizes his voice. She hears him and knows it is her teacher. All of Jesus’ resurrection appearances to the disciples are meant to anchor the miracles, the healing stories, the teachings, the values he brought in life. They are not to superimpose a new set of values.

Jesus is not the only one raised from the dead. He raises others, too. In the raising of Lazarus, Jesus brings a friend to life whose untimely death he was too late to prevent.

I like the comparison here to the one shot comic, *Superman vs. Darkseid: Apokolips Now!* In this comic, Superman’s niece Natasha says, “I was raised to believe that love and commitment and personal responsibility hold us all together . . . I know Superman believes this, too. I know he believes that if you save one life, you save the world. I know he would go to ends of the universe for a friend.”

In the course of this comic, Superman battles Darkseid, the god of evil. He goes down in the world of Apokolips for the power to resurrect his friend John Henry Irons/Steel. It is an epic battle, mirroring Christ’s descent into the depths of hell. It ends in his victory. As it ends, Natasha says, “Bottom line. He changed my life. My life will count for something. I WILL make a difference. I will work to change the world.”

In the end, Superman and all the superheroes should instill within us these values – to make a positive difference in this world. We should not simply admire the power of others. But we should use the power God has given us to make a difference in the world.

In closing I share with you three spiritual lessons from the comics:

**Lesson 1: We all need heroes and all need a savior.** While we proclaim belief in one savior, we all need heroes. They can be found in many places – firefighters, police, soldiers, EMS techs, teachers, doctors. We look to our heroes to show us how to live and how to ultimately be heroes ourselves.

**Lesson 2: We believe evil exists. And while it has its appeal, we recognize that it needs to be conquered.** Some of our favorite characters are the arch-villains - the Joker, Magneto, Lex Luthor. But, they are not characters we would hang out with every day. Their anarchy and power is attractive, but ultimately we side with the super heroes. If we didn't believe in good overcoming evil, we wouldn't be here.

**Lesson 3: We all have a responsibility to take action and make things better.** All of us can admit that comics get a lot of things wrong. All men aren't built like Mr. Universe. All women are not super models. Most people look ridiculous in skin-tight leotards. If someone punches you in the head, it hurts. Both of you.

But this they get right – and this is the important stuff. They show us how we are supposed to live in our ongoing, everyday battle with life. They show us how to save the world. They show us how to change ourselves. In their own way, they show us how to become people of peace, compassion and love. We can question the way things have been done and who it helps and hurts. To change the world takes wisdom, courage and tenacity. They do not turn their backs on the battle.

Any struggle worth joining is one you and I should engage! I will

see you on the front lines. If it helps you be strong, bring your capes. Bring your superhero masks. But please leave your skin-tight leotards at home. Together, we can form our own Justice League. Let's enjoy the challenge. Amen.