

Baptism of Our Lord

13 January 2019

Isaiah 43:1-7; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

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I'm sure you have noticed, like I have, how popular superhero movies have become lately. It seems that every time I go to the movie theatre there is at least one if not two or three to choose from. And it's not just the traditional superheroes, Superman, Spiderman and Batman, there are so many more – Black Panther, Captain Marvel, the Avengers, Ant-Man, Thor, Captain America, the Guardians of the Galaxy, the Fantastic Four, the X-Men, The Hulk, Wonder Woman, Aquaman, Wolverine and, of course...Iron Man! (I hear he is going to be making an appearance at the cathedral in a little while) Even Disney has gotten into it with animated superheroes like The Incredibles. The Marvel universe has exploded on to the silver screen. The movie rating website *Rotten Tomatoes* has a list of the 67 best superhero movies of all time. Sixty-seven! And that's just the good ones. On that list, the top seven were all released in the last two years and 14 of the top 20 were released in the last five years. That just goes to show how popular the superhero genre has become.

It makes one wonder what it is about a good superhero movie that so many find so attractive. Sure there's the stunts, the computer generated special effects and the outlandish costumes, but is there more? What is it about a superhero battling the forces of darkness and evil that makes us want to shell out \$25 or more (with popcorn) so that we can escape into another world for 2 hours? It's got to be more than bulging biceps, washboard abs and spandex. I think it is. I think there's something of our own superhero fantasies coming to life on the screen when the lights go down and the curtain goes up on the latest caped crusader flick. It's fun to imagine - if only for a little while – what it would be like if we had some superhuman ability or power. Wouldn't it be cool if we were faster than a speeding bullet or able to leap tall buildings in a single bound? Or what if we had a hammer or a sword or a shield that was indestructible

and could stop anyone dead in their tracks if they came near to us. Superhero stories allow us to imagine that we are indestructible, that we are imperishable, that we are immortal. They also allow us to imagine that we could do something for which the whole world would be grateful. We imagine that without us and our superhuman abilities and efforts, the world would spiral into an apocalyptic pit of despair under the control of whatever evil genius we are fighting. Superhero movies are stories that have the potential to restore our faith in ourselves and humankind. They make us feel like there is still some good in the world and that we are part of it. And they make us feel that in the end, the good will win. Superhero stories are about hope and optimism and sometimes they are the best way to counteract a world that seems at times to have very little of that going for it.

When we hear the words from the prophet Isaiah this morning, it's easy to hear a kind of superhero narrative in them.

"Thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you."

Isaiah 43:1-2

Sounds kind of superhero-like, doesn't it? The waters will not overwhelm you, the fire will not burn you up – how is that possible? Asbestos-man! Able to walk through the hottest forest fire or swim through lava flowing from the most violent volcano and not even singe a single hair on his long flowing mane! Okay, so maybe I'm overstating it a bit, but if you were to read this when you are in a certain frame of mind, you could easily believe that God is making some pretty incredible promises here. And if you are having trouble being positive about the state of the world, if you are not as hopeful and optimistic as you may once have been, these words sound pretty good. Yes, God, give me these superpowers, give me the ability to rid my life of negativity and doubt and cynicism; help me in my gloom and despair.

Or maybe it's not that bad, maybe we're not convinced that this world is all bad, that there is still some good in the world and occasionally we see it, but haven't been seeing enough of it or seeing it often enough. Maybe we just have those fleeting moments where we wonder what's going on. God is good and people are basically good but sometimes it seems that there just isn't quite enough of that good to go around. Or we wonder why God seems so silent or distant or hidden. We are faithful people who long for things to be good and right and proper, and are hoping for something to break loose soon. And so we stand in anticipation, watching, waiting, wondering. And then we hear these words from Isaiah, a promise that God will vindicate us, that God will make all things new and better and we wonder what it will take for this superhero God to break into our lives and into our world and make everything right.

It's kind of where the people of Israel were at in the first century CE. They were waiting for God's Messiah to show up so that all would be put right again. And then John arrives on the scene and says, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." (Luke 3:16) Yes, that is the one they were waiting for, the one with the Holy Spirit, the one with the fire, our champion, our superhero. But instead of a beefy superhero in tights, they get Jesus, the itinerant preacher, the son of working class parents.

There are those who want to make Jesus into a superhero, there are those who think of Jesus as the one who can defy logic and suspend all laws of nature. Just look at the miracles he does, look at the healings he performs, look at the signs and wonders he accomplishes. He is the ultimate superhero. And it all starts here at his baptism. But if we look carefully at the baptism of Jesus, we discover that this is no superhero story, this is not supernatural, superhuman event, this is a love story. It is a story about so much more than what Jesus can do or will do, it is a story about how much God loves us and cares for us.

When Jesus is baptized, Saint Luke tells us that three things happen: the heavens open, the Spirit descends and a voice is heard. That voice, the voice of God, says something very interesting, it says, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." (Luke 3:22) Note that the voice addresses Jesus directly – *You* are my Son. These are words of affirmation and identity and with them God claims Jesus as one of God's own and tells him that he is loved by God. But more than that, the voice from heaven affirms that God is pleased with Jesus. Before Jesus has done anything, before he has turned water into wine or raised Lazarus from the grave, before he has fed five thousand people with five loaves and two fish or stilled the storm at sea, before he has washed his disciples' feet or gone to the cross, God says that God is pleased with Jesus. Jesus hasn't had to do anything to earn God's love, here in his baptism, it is declared: *you* are my Son, *you* I love, with *you* I am pleased. Then Jesus goes from that place, knowing that God loves him and is pleased with him, to do all the things that he does and face all the things that he faces. He still is tempted in the desert, he is still opposed by the Pharisees and Sadducees, he is still deserted and betrayed by his disciples, he is still mocked and scourged by the Romans and he is still crucified. And he still rises three days later. God's love does not prevent Jesus from facing all those things, it does, however, see him through it.

Isaiah, speaking on behalf of God, says to the people of Israel, "When you pass... through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire...the flame shall not consume you... because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you." Notice that God does not say that they will not face these things, only that these things will not ultimately end them. Why? "Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you." (Isaiah 43:4); because "I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine." (Isaiah 43:1) I know you, you belong to me, you are important to me and I love you. I will go with you, I will be with you and I will keep you close to me always. When Jesus is baptized and about to begin his earthly

ministry in earnest, God speaks to him and says, "I know you, you belong to me, you are important to me and I love you. I will go with you, I will be with you and I will keep you close to me always." No extraordinary powers, but an extraordinary promise.

And here is the amazing thing, the surprising thing, the thing that is better than any superpower: each time we come to the font to baptize someone new, those same promises are made once again. Oh sure, the heavens don't open, doves don't descend and heavenly voices aren't heard, but the promise is still there. As a cross is made on the forehead of the one being baptized, we hear the words, "I sign you with the cross, and mark you as Christ's own forever." Sound familiar? You are my son/daughter, the beloved; with you I am well pleased. It is as if God speaks these very words to us. They do not bestow on us any superpowers, but they do make us a very important promise: When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you...because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you. Baptism bestows on us no extraordinary powers, instead it makes us an extraordinary promise. Martin Luther encouraged people to remember their baptism each and every day. In his *Large Catechism* he wrote, "A truly Christian life is nothing else than a daily baptism once begun and ever to be continued." Baptism is not a one-and-done event, it is a reminder of who and whose we are. We are God's beloved child, and God is pleased with us, not because we have done anything to earn God's love it but simply because God loves us.

It might be fun and helpful to be strong like The Hulk or fast like The Flash or able to sling webs and climb walls like Spiderman, but I would rather have a cross on my forehead than any superpower. That's all the assurance I need, that's the one thing that restores my hope and my faith every time. *You* are mine, *you* I love, with *you* I am most pleased. Thanks be to God! Amen.