

Waiting for a Savior
by Rev. Doug McCusker

“To you is born this day a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.” Our Bible readings that we heard this evening are some of the most familiar and enduring passages of all time. We read them here every Christmas Eve. In Christian churches all over the world, those passages are the culmination of 4 weeks of Advent; a season of hope, expectation, and patient waiting for the coming of the Messiah. The Messiah is someone sent by God, actually God himself, to rid the world of the evil forces that oppress humanity. Nowadays though, all we have to do is pick up a graphic novel or go to the movies and we can see a superhero origin story brought to life. We don't have to wait for Christmas.

The superhero saga is going gang busters these days. All my childhood comic book heroes are now movie stars. This year there were 12 superhero movies in the theaters. 13 if you count Captain Underpants. And there is another dozen in the pipeline waiting to be released next year.

We saw the first blockbuster female superhero on the screen with Wonder Woman. There was the Justice League of America, Spiderman, Logan, and Thor. Now there's a God. We even saw the last Jedi. Well I haven't seen it yet, but I plan to soon. Some of them are origin stories, sequels, reboots, mashups, anything to feed the insatiable hunger among us to be saved!

And that's just the movies. Every television network has a series featuring people with unusual powers who are destined to save the world, or at least the town they live in. This sermon almost didn't happen because I was too busy binge-watching the series Stranger Things on Netflix. In that show, set in the 1980's, demons and nasty forces are released onto a suburban town in Indiana by an unwitting government agency trying to use psychic powers to defeat the Soviets. The heroes are middle-school kids and the local sheriff.

What is it about the Savior, that captivates us? Why do we need to be saved? And why does the superhero story never go away? There are 3 things that are usually present in every salvation story, which set the stage for the Savior: 1) a powerful evil villain; 2) a crossroad in time; and 3) powerless victims.

In our readings today, Herod is the powerful villain. He represents the evil Roman empire. Herod is an historical figure who was the designated puppet King of Rome. He was a Jew himself, from a family that rose to power and negotiated with Caesar to rule the area known as Palestine. He had his own army, but if things got out of hand, he knew he could call on the mighty Legions of Rome to quell any unrest. And they didn't mess around as Jesus was to learn 33 years later.

Herod's rule was known for massive building projects which employed many people, but also required heavy taxation of the ordinary citizens. That was the point of the census, to get a handle on all the potential taxpayers.

Under his rule, there was a wide separation between the urban rich and the rural poor. Herod was feared and disliked by a large segment of the population. He was the symbol of foreign occupation and evil oppression. Bandits, freedom fighters and people claiming to be the Messiah rose up periodically to challenge his power. But Herod's draconian rule always seemed to round them up and nip them in the bud. However, this

time, in this story, the real Messiah got away from his grasp because he had angels and the heavenly host watching out for him. This Messiah had a mission that could not be squelched by violence or mighty armies.

Looking back through the lens of history, that time and place of Herod's Judea doesn't seem to be particularly unusual. The Roman Empire stretched all over the Mediterranean region and most of Europe. The socio-economic situation in Judea was not much different than what the Saxons were experiencing in France or the nomadic tribes in Algeria. But, at the time that this story was written, over 70 years after the birth of Christ, the Jews were being obliterated by the Romans. The Jews had mounted a revolution and actually succeeded for several years until the reign of terror came crashing down. The Roman armies destroyed the holy temple in Jerusalem and scattered the Jewish people all over Europe, Africa and Asia.

The historical crossroads of our story was being experienced by the storytellers in their time and channeled into the narrative of the Christ child in his time. The storyteller's world had been turned upside down. A Savior was needed and not the garden variety Zealot revolutionaries who brought the wrath of Rome down on them. A Savior who was God incarnate and who wouldn't save the world through violence, but through love.

And then you have the ordinary people; the holy family, the innkeeper the stable hands and the shepherds. They lived precariously on the economic edge. To them was born the Savior. They are the timeless victims of evil and oppression. They are us! Even if we are relatively well off, we still identify with those who feel powerless and afraid.

Sometimes we feel like the sheep and the animals, left out in the cold while the king's caravan passes us by on the road. The problems of today may be different than in the days of Jesus. Today we have internet hackers, international terrorists, white supremacists and the fat cat 1 per centers. But they are basically the same villain in a different costume. Poverty, racism, religious bigotry and violence haven't gone away. They are still the tools of unjust power. They are the same root evils that the Messiah was sent to vanquish. And we are still waiting for a Savior.

But if we are waiting for a superhero with supernatural powers, we will still be waiting for another 2000 years. The Christmas story is about the real power that us ordinary, common folk already have: the powers of love, empathy, compassion and community. The Messiah in the Christ child was sent to christen us as saviors; to awaken us to our natural power. I've seen enough superhero movies to realize that it's not the muscles, or secret weapons, or X-ray vision, which topples the villains. It's the love of humanity that every hero possesses, which we all possess if only we were to claim it. Love, empathy, compassion and community do not die as long as we learn to wield them for our fellow humans and pass them on to our children.

But guess what, we also possess the evil power of Herod and Lex Luther. We say, "Our country is so divided." We treat the people who don't think like us as the evil ones. "How could they be so stupid?" But, the crossroads of time, the battlefield of good and evil is inside all of us. We don't have to look at others, to find the weapons of destruction. Anytime that we are willing to let injustices slide, to be complicit while others suffer, to hurt others for our own gain, we are the villains. Every moment is a new saga and we are the setting, the writers, and the characters. We are the story and the storytellers.

The angels told the shepherds, "To you is born this day the Savior, the Messiah, the Lord." They were also talking to us. Every moment is an opportunity for the Messiah to be born in our hearts. Wait no longer. Stop being the spectator. Claim your role as the ordinary Savior. Wield your weapons of love, empathy, compassion and community right here, right now. And whenever you do, you will awaken the Savior in those around you. It's free of charge.

Make this Christmas the blockbuster event of the year. Coming soon to the theater in your own heart.