

Superhero, Superman, Savior
By Rev. Sharon Lee MacArthur
For Berkeley Chinese Community Church
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Mark 5:21-43

"When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered around him; and he was by the sea. Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet and begged him repeatedly, "My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live." So he went with him.

And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him. Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said, "If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well." Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, "Who touched my clothes?" And his disciples said to him, "You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, 'Who touched me?' " He looked all around to see who had done it. But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease."

While he was still speaking, some people came from the leader's house to say, "Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?" But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, "Do not fear, only believe."

He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James. When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. When he had entered, he said to them, "Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping."

And they laughed at him. Then he put them all outside, and took the child's father and mother and those who were with him, and went in where the child was. He took her by the hand and said to her, "Talitha cum," which means, "Little girl, get up!" And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement. He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat."



Once upon a time there were two little boys who were always getting into trouble. If any mischief happens in their neighborhood, the two boys are probably involved.

Their parents were at their wits' end. Their mom heard that the new minister in town had been pretty successful in disciplining children, so she went to see him and asked if he would speak with her boys.



The pastor agreed...he'd see them one at a time. So the mother sent the younger one first, in the morning, and would send the older boy in the afternoon.

The pastor, who was a huge man with a booming voice, sat the younger boy down and asked him sternly, "Do you know where God is, son?" The boy's mouth dropped open, but he didn't answer - - he just sat there wide-eyed with his mouth hanging open. So he repeated the question in an even sterner tone, "Where is God?!" Again, the boy didn't answer. The pastor raised his voice even more and shook his finger in the boy's face and bellowed, "Where is God?!"

The boy screamed & ran out the door of the church directly home & hid in his closet.



When his brother found him in the closet, he asked, "what happened?" The younger brother, still gasping for breath, replied, "We are in BIG trouble this time. "GOD is missing, and they think we did it!"

That's from that little boy's perspective - the thing is...I don't think God is missing at all. In fact, God is all over the place...thanks to Henry Brinton, senior pastor of Fairfax Presbyterian Church in Fairfax, Virginia, and Timothy Merrill, Executive Editor of Homiletics I was reminded that God can be found even in blockbuster Hollywood movies...

OK - here's the scene -

An Almighty Father sends his son to Earth. He puts him there for a purpose.

"They can be a great people," says the father. "They only lack the light to show them the way. For this reason, above all - their capacity for good - I have sent them you, my only son."

On Earth, the son fights hard for truth and justice. He displays amazing abilities and incredible insights, but sometimes he feels that his power is being drained out of him.

After a dramatic battle with the forces of evil, he is killed. But then he is resurrected and ascends into heaven. He returns in a second coming.

This is the story of Jesus, right? Well, yes, it is. But it is *a/so* the story of...Superman!

A few years after the Passion of Christ and a couple of decades after another blockbuster Superman movie with Christopher Reeves in the starring role, Superman returned in the movie, Superman Returns. I saw this movie and remember much of it...

In this version, there definitely were some images that reminded me of Jesus – there's one where Superman's arms outstretched,



as though he is being crucified; there's another where we watch the bad guy stab Superman in the side with a piece of kryptonite - reminiscent of the Jesus getting stabbed in the side with a spear. At one point in the movie, a Lois Lane says, "The world doesn't need a savior, and neither do I."

The thing is – we DO - we all do, but maybe not quite in the same way as the movie suggests.

"The Man of Steel is Back," according to a headline in The Daily Planet. And that news sent many, many to the movie theaters – it was the 6th highest grossing film of 2006 - as a nation we have always been crazy about our superheroes. Women want to be with them, and men want to **be** them.



As comedian Jerry Seinfeld commented, "Spider-Man, Superman, Batman . . . men don't see these as fantasies, they see them as career opportunities."

But I wonder if there are any statistics about this movie Superman Returns luring people into church? I wonder because the story can draw us deeper into the life of a true superhero named Jesus. Jesus may not have super-strength and x-ray vision, but he's got the power to save us....and I use the word "save" cautiously...

One of the writers of the Superman comic strip says that this superhero adheres to "a Kryptonian-based belief system centered on monotheistic philosophy." I don't even know what that means!

But, after arriving on Earth, Superman grows up in a Protestant family, in the Midwest. Later, he visits a Catholic priest for confession, and returns for additional advice. He engages in frequent battles with his arch-enemy "Lex Luthor" – doesn't that sound like Martin Luther?!?!? Novelist John Byrne says that he has "always imagined Superman to have a fairly matter-of-fact attitude toward faith - he believes in God, but he does not make a big deal about it."

So Superman is a believer. But he's not going to force his faith on anyone. And what about Jesus - not Superman? Right? but he is the Son of Man?

Jesus in the gospel of Mark is a man of action - he goes around curing the sick, casting out demons, cleansing a leper, and healing a paralytic - all before he finishes calling his twelve disciples (2:13-19).



Then more action - beginning to sound like a blockbuster movie - Jesus stills a great windstorm on the water



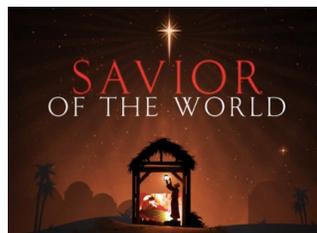
and heals a demon-possessed man sending the man's numerous unclean spirits into a herd of 2000 swine,



which immediately stampede down a steep bank into the sea, where they drown (Mark 4:35-5:13).

That would be an incredible sight on the big screen - can't you just see it as you cover your ears to soften the larger than life sound in the digital surround-sound and swelling music?

This superhero Jesus is all about saving people from illness, evil, destruction and death. In fact, the Greek word for "save" pops up again and again in this gospel, although it is usually reduced to bland English words such as "heal" or "get well." Jesus saves – living up to role that some think he was born to – Savior of the world.



The people around Jesus, though, can see his power clearly, and they don't mince any words. Remember - this is a desperate time for that part of the world. The Romans rule and life for the Jews was not golden - they are looking for help, they're looking to be saved by no one less than a Superman.



In today's gospel story, Jesus is in a crowd of people and Jairus appears – he's a leader of the synagogue. And yet - he falls at Jesus' feet and begs him repeatedly, "My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well."

Jesus got his reputation as a superhero for a reason - he CAN save people! and so Jesus goes with Jairus – along with most of the crowd....

On the way to Jairus' home, a woman, who has been suffering from terrible bleeding for twelve years, joins the crowd that is following Jesus. She and the others press in on him like a mob of adoring fans, and the woman says to herself, "If I can just touch his clothes, I will be made well." "If I touch . I will be saved" (MK. 24-28). Sort of like a fan of the Man of Steel of the silver screen, dreaming of placing a finger in the folds of his red cape.



So she does it...she touches him. And immediately she knows that she's been healed! She can feel it! The pain, the suffering, the social isolation, the ritual impurity that she has endured for twelve long years is suddenly over. She has been saved!

Then the plot thickens. Like Superman in the vicinity of a piece of Kryptonite, Jesus suddenly begins to feel that his power has left him. "Who touched my clothes?" he shouts to the mob pressed in around him.

Nobody answers.

"Who touched my clothes?" Jesus needs to know.

"Uh . . . like, everybody," say the disciples to themselves.

But Jesus is looking for a particular person, the unique individual who came for one reason - to be saved.

A few more moments pass. Then the woman steps forward. She is full of fear...she is trembling, she tells her superhero the whole truth. But instead of punishing her for his momentary power-

loss, he commends her by saying, "Daughter, your faith has made you well." Literally, your faith has saved you. "Go in peace, and be healed of your disease" (vv. 29-34).



Jesus stuns the woman...and the crowd, by stating that her faith has saved her...Not his clothes...Not her touch. Not anything in or on his body at all. **Instead**, Jesus says that her faith is the source of her healing - she is saved by her conviction that Jesus is the decisive expression of the power and the presence of God.

Then the scene shifts, in a dramatic way like what you might find in blockbuster movies. While Jesus is still speaking, some people come to Jairus with the news that his daughter is dead. But Jesus overhears this message, and says to Jairus, "Do not fear, only believe" (vv. 35-36). He has just commended a woman – an **unclean** woman - for believing; now he turns around and commands a man to believe – a man who is among the leaders of society!

They proceed to Jairus's house, where there is a commotion being caused by people weeping and wailing. Jesus cuts through the chaos, throws the mourners out, and enters the house with only the father, the mother, and three of his disciples. Without lengthy prayers or dramatic gestures, Jesus reaches out to the child and says, "Little girl, get up!"



And immediately the girl gets up and begins to walk about (vv. 37-42). The conclusion we are led to is "Celebrate the faith that will save you...if you believe, you will be saved" and we tack on "saved from illness, from worry, saved from death, saved from suffering, saved from fear, from sorrow, from pain..."

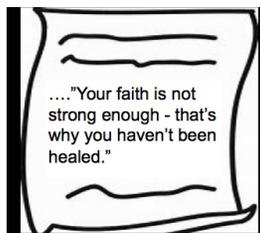
Well - It's not that simple, folks...

I've seen where that line of thinking can lead us...if faith and belief doesn't save us from all those things, we wonder if it's because we aren't believing enough...we think we are suffering because we don't have enough faith...

Some of you may have heard me talk about my friend Joan in high school – she was the mom in her household since she was 10. Her mother had Multiple Sclerosis and had been wheelchair bound for over five years by the time I met Joan in high school. Back in the mid 50's there were no motorized wheelchairs to help folks get around – at least none that I saw in the valley town of Stockton California.



So, “church” meant sitting in front of the family TV to watch the evangelists. There were many incidents of “healing” that the live and TV audiences witnessed. Joan’s mom was one of them and took a chance - she wrote a number of letters and asked to be healed. She would pray and watch the TV preacher pray...months went by and there was no improvement in her condition. She wrote again and again...she finally got the answer that would devastate her - “Your faith is not strong enough - that’s why you haven’t been healed.”



To listen to my friend share about how this affected her mother and family was enough to turn me away from organized religion for many years.

That was just about 60 years ago...Joan’s mother has been gone for many decades...Joan and I have lost touch...perhaps she doesn’t even know the turn of events and faith in my life. I think of Joan and her mother often especially with these passages of Jesus healing....and wonder what the real message is....



The God who created us all - doesn’t **that** God want to save us **all**? And if so, then “being saved” for us cannot possibly mean from all the human conditions and suffering on that huge list. It must mean something else -



The one that works for me is

- “saved from separation from God”; or
- “saved from a rift in the relationship with God”;
- corollary - “to experience the peace that the world cannot give.”

This kind of saving works no matter what happens...

- whether a person is healed in the physical sense or not
- whether a person dies or not
- whether a person is delivered from the conditions that causes the suffering, worry and sorrow or not.
- It works, folks!
- Being saved is being saved from separation from God...

You see, Jesus must have had quiet one-on-one times with individuals in his ministry - I wonder about them...

People DID die;

people DID have disease:

people DID suffer pain and

people DID have real fears.

We are led to think that Jesus physically healed **every** person he encountered.

What if this isn't true?

What if what we read in the Bible are the extraordinary encounters?

What if we don't hear about the day-to-day ordinary "saves" – the ones that were ordinary and not "worthy" of recording...the "saves" in which Jesus merely held the hand of the one who is suffering and who dies?

in which Jesus comforts the bereaved to let them know and feel that God is present?

Isn't that the Superhero, the Superman, the Savior that we all want and need?

Isn't that the Superhero, the Superman, the Superwoman that Jesus is calling us to be?

May it be so...