

Help Is on the Way! (Luke 23:33-43)

Growing up in the 70s, Saturday mornings meant one thing—cartoons. I was a huge Bugs Bunny fan from way back and had seen every episode of Scooby Doo. But I liked the newer stuff too: Hong Kong Phooey, Grape Ape, Fat Albert, and the Harlem Globetrotter's Popcorn Machine. But my favorite show was Super Friends, a kid-friendly version of the League of Justice.

I liked it not only because it featured superheroes like Superman, Wonder Woman, Aqua-man, Batman and Robin but because it had them all fighting together as a team. And it wasn't because I was a big cheerleader for "teamwork"—which I guess I was—but because I thought that with all of them joining forces, nobody could beat them. The idea of an undefeatable force helped make sense of, if not a chaotic world, then at least a threatening one.

I know a lot of people think Hollywood's obsession with superheroes is nuts, but I've always been fascinated by them. I

find the idea of a power so invincible that no force can stand against it compelling.

It makes sense when you stop to think about it, doesn't it?

When the world feels like it's spinning out of control, the thought that someone or something might show up to put things back in order is attractive.

Magical thinking, wish fulfillment, and other coping mechanisms allow people to exert a little control over a complicated and, often, dangerous world.

But we shouldn't be too quick to judge. Humans have always discounted what they see as other people's "superstitions."

"Spending money on a lottery ticket is reasonable. But rain dances and voodoo dolls? That's where we draw the line."

But these coping mechanisms are crucial release valves. We need whatever emotional help we can get in facing a scary and unpredictable universe.

Which is why superheroes make so much sense, right?

It should come as no surprise then that Superman made his debut in a DC comic book in April 1938. Think about the world at that time. In March of that year, just before Superman's first appeared, Nazi Germany annexed Austria, absorbing it as German territory. Tensions with European neighbor, Czechoslovakia, intensified, raising worldwide concerns about the threat of war in Europe (at a time when the world was still traumatized by the **first** grisly European War, World War I).

In 1938, Germany also introduced policies, putting flesh on the bones of Nazi antisemitism. They began deporting Jews to Poland. Then, in October, they canceled all Jewish passports. On November 9th of that year, roving bands of brown-shirted goons

and the public emboldened by them incited Kristallnacht, “the night of broken glass,” busting the windows of Jewish businesses and beating anyone they suspected of being Jewish. Three days later, on November 12th, all Jewish businesses were closed by government decree.

“This sounds like a job for Superman!”

So, we shouldn’t be surprised that Superman appeared on the scene. Batman debuted in 1939, followed by Captain Marvel in 1940, and Captain America in 1941. And thus was launched what is widely called “the golden age of comic books,” which lasted until 1950—through the tumult of WWII, with its shared loss of life in war, the discovery of Nazi death camps, the advent of the atomic bomb, and the aftermath of a Europe turned to rubble.

When things are bleakest, modern Americans aren’t above a little magical thinking ourselves, are we?

Right out of seminary, I had a great job as a minister at one of the “downtown” churches in small-town Appalachia. Things seemed to be going really well. The people were great. They took care of us and made us part of their families.

But in the summer of that year, the Disciples General Assembly met in St. Louis. The main item on the agenda was the election of a new General Minister and President.

The candidate on the ballot replaced the candidate who’d gone down in flames two years before, losing a tight (some thought crooked) election in Tulsa.

The defeated candidate was my professor and friend, Dr. Michael Kinnamon. His candidacy unfolded while I was at Lexington Theological Seminary.

Dr. Kinnamon remains to this day, one of my all-time favorite professors ... heck, my all-time favorite human beings. He was

unfailingly kind and thoughtful to me ... and he was a Cubs fan, so you know ... he was one of God's favorite people too.

But Michael's nomination quickly drew fire when it became public knowledge that he and his wife were longtime supporters of GLAD—Gay, Lesbian, and Affirming Disciples. His support for the LGBTQ community became a flash point.

In the lead-up to the vote in Tulsa, Michael traveled across the U.S., meeting with churches and leaders who wanted to grill him on his supposed heresy. There was a counter-presence among the Disciples called Disciples Renewal, which was kind of like the Stone/Campbell Q-anon and threatened to split the denomination over the “homosexual question”—as it was then called.

I told you all that to tell you this. Some of the families in my new congregation had been among those who found Dr. Kinnamon's candidacy terrifying. So, two years later, months after I'd started, these families got pretty wound up again in the lead-up to the

vote. And because they knew I was a friend and former student of the guy they feared would make Disciples “the gay church,” their anxiety found a focus in me.

The main family who had me in their sights started ramping up the pressure, spreading rumors that I was soft on the “homosexual question” and that I voted for Dick Hamm, Dr. Kinnamon’s replacement, whom they assumed was just as liberal as Michael had been. They wondered aloud whether I even believed the Bible. I felt sure I was about to lose my job, which made me super anxious because I figured if I got fired after only nine months as a minister, I might never find another job.

The wealthiest man in the congregation, a coal mine owner who, along with his wife, had been extraordinarily kind to Susan and me. He told me when I first arrived that he wanted me to succeed. They were expecting big things from me. So, if I had any problems, he wanted me to know he was there to help me in any way he could. Terrified of losing my job and not knowing

what else to do, I called him and asked if I could come to see him. He said, "Of course!"

When I arrived, he and I went into his study. He said, "Preacher, sit down and tell me what's got you so upset."

So, I told him.

He didn't say anything at all while I spoke. Afterward, he nodded and said, "I'm not going to ask you what you believe. Frankly, you're trained in this stuff, and you know more about it than I do. Plus, I really don't care what you believe. But here's what I'm going to do. Do the elders know what you believe about this stuff?"

"No. Nobody's ever asked me what I believe."

"All right, then. I want you to write a letter to the elders. Just be honest about whatever you believe, and I'll support you."

“Okay,” I said, somewhat relieved but still unsure.

Then he said, “Here’s what I’ll do. Do you have any vacation time left?”

“I’m supposed to go to my 10-year high school reunion the weekend after next.”

“Will you be gone over the weekend?”

“Yes, I have someone to preach.”

“That’s all I need to know. I’ll take care of it.”

I didn’t know what he meant by that, but ten minutes after we pulled into our driveway after returning from my reunion, a carload of some of the older women in the church pulled in. They knocked on the door. I thought it was strange of them to show up

unannounced, but small-town life was a bit more relaxed about that sort of thing.

Anyway, one of the women couldn't wait to talk. "Did you hear what happened in church this morning?"

"No, we just pulled in."

"I've never seen anything like it in my life. James (the coal mine owner) walked down front during the invitation hymn. Nobody knew what was going on. He's not the type to rededicate his life or anything. Anyway, after the music stopped, he waved the preacher away and turned to the congregation. He said, 'It's come to my attention that some people are giving our young preacher a hard time. And I want it to stop. Today.'"

"Pretty soon, a bunch of people joined him down front. Just stood there next to him as he talked."

My eyes were bugging out by this point.

“But that’s not all. After church, James took your biggest critic down to the basement and sat, just the two of them, in the Sunday School room. Mildred’s nosy, so after we went out to eat, we stopped back by the church ... just to check. Two hours later, they were still down there.”

And then the third woman held something out to me, a gift unlike any other I’ve ever received. She pressed a cassette tape into my hand and said, “Here’s a recording of the service if you don’t believe us.”

When I tell other ministers that story, looks of awe tinged with jealousy come over their faces.

Even ministers long for superheroes.

Once we understand this human desire to be rescued, we can finally see the emotional impact of Jesus' death sentence in our text for today—a text that's admittedly a strange one as we sit on the threshold of the Christmas Season. I mean, seriously. Who thought it was a good idea to have Jesus on the cross so close to Thanksgiving Day?

Today is the Reign of Christ Sunday, the final Sunday in the Christian Year, before we flip the Christian calendar to Advent next Sunday, beginning a new year. Reign of Christ Sunday is meant to remind us of the cosmic nature of Jesus's work in announcing the in-breaking of God's new realm of peace and justice.

So, here we are today, staring up at Jesus on the cross, between two criminals needing a little help. These criminals, it should be noted, aren't common thieves up on burglary charges. In Greek, they're identified as *Lestai*. *Lestai* are what some sociologists of religion call "social bandits," a particular class of criminal for

whom crucifixion was aimed. We might better understand them as political revolutionaries.

Crucifixion in the Roman Empire was reserved for two classes of people: the enslaved and *lestai*. As James Cone famously noted, the cross was Rome's version of what Americans came to call the "lynching tree"—a form of public humiliation so gruesome, its purpose was to make sure that certain kinds of people stayed in their place. Otherwise, the state was more than happy to make an example of them.

Which means, of course, that Jesus was crucified not because he annoyed the Jewish religious leaders, as has been popularly taught for years, but because Caesar's goons were afraid he'd lead a revolt and try to take over Jerusalem. And they wanted to nip that one in the bud while communicating to the *hoi polloi* that making political noise could land you in hot water.

And this, in a nutshell, is why everyone was so baffled and upset by Jesus. Everybody, his followers, the general population, the two criminals whose company he was now keeping on the cross all expected something different from him. They wanted a messiah—which was as much a political term as a religious one. Everyone, including the Romans, thought Jesus was going to incite a rebellion to overthrow the Roman government.

Life for 95% of the people living in first-century Palestine was, as Thomas Hobbs once said, “nasty, brutish, and short.” The Pax Romana had more to do with putting down armed threats to their trade routes than establishing some ancient Near Eastern Shangri-La.

Ordinary people were tired of seeing their children starve and their money stolen. The world was a pretty grim place for them. Call it magical thinking if you want. Lay it off on wish fulfillment if you must. The people who followed Jesus were looking for someone or something to save them. They wanted Superman,

somebody, as the first criminal pointed out, who could save himself and everybody else.

“Come on, Jesus! Take off your Clark Kent glasses, get down off that cross, and save us!”

And what does Jesus do?

He stretches out his arms, but instead of using them to fly, the Romans use them to fasten him to a tree.

As it's been typically understood in Protestant Christianity, the cross is a bridge over the chasm of our separation from God—the cross as a prop in the great morality play God has sketched out. In this view, the cross isn't the point of Jesus' life and ministry; it's a mistake or a horrible tragedy; it's a short-term inconvenience through which Jesus must pass before moving on to the more difficult work of resurrection. On this reading, the cross is merely a tool.

But I'd like to suggest that the cross is the **p**oint of Jesus' life and ministry. The cross is exactly the point at which Jesus most clearly what God's up to in creating a **new** world.

And it's not because God needs some sort of blood sacrifice to appease God's anger. As Terry Eagleton says, "A god who loves his creatures so dearly that he is prepared to be done to death by them clearly requires no appeasing."

Instead, the cross is the shape of the life Jesus calls us to lead. That's why Jesus, properly understood, makes so little sense in our world. It's why popular religion works so tirelessly to domesticate him, make him everyone's pal, and make him the political patron of those already in power—because the **real** Jesus is headed in a much more dangerous direction.

As Robert Capon has noted:

The human race is, was, and probably always will be deeply unwilling to accept a human messiah. We don't want to be saved in our humanity; we want to be fished out of it. We crucified Jesus, not because he was God, but because he blasphemed: He claimed to be God and then failed to come up to our standards for assessing the claim. It's not that we weren't looking for the Messiah; it's just that he wasn't what we were looking for. Our kind of Messiah would come down from a cross. He would carry a folding phone booth in his back pocket. He wouldn't do a stupid thing like rising from the dead. He would do a smart thing like never dying (The Romance of the Word, 90-1).

The world doesn't want a God willing to be done to death, but a God who'll hop down off the cross, kick some bad guys around, and restore peace, justice, and the American way!

Of course, for those of us who aren't nearly as competent as our résumés suggest—that's the good news.

God's not sitting around fretting, saying, "This sounds like a job for Super Man!"

No. God's relying on us. In all our brokenness, with all of our magical thinking and our longing for a superhero to save us, God is counting on **us** to help save the world.

So, take heart! Help is on the way!

It's just that Superman's not enough for this one; God thinks the world needs you.

—Amen.