

You've noticed it. Haven't you.

You've seen the commercials and read the marquees.

You might not have seen the Dragon Con parade down Peachtree, but you've noticed.

Admit it. You and your kids and the youth group have been on Platform 9 ¾ to Hoggwarts and you know all about Harry and Ron and Hermione and Voldemort

The teenage girls in your life have probably drunk up the Twilight books and movies like sweet tea on a Georgia porch in July.

You've seen Spiderman, Batman, Iron Man, and Superman.

So you've noticed.

It's everywhere.

You know what this means, don't you.

We live in the Age of the superhero.

No, it's true.

This is the age of the superhero. Everything is superheroes. In the past four years, no fewer than 50 superhero and fantasy movies have hit the Hollywood big screens, grossing over 7 billion dollars. Werewolf and zombie movies sold another billion dollars at the box office. J.K Rowling was voted the most influential woman in England.

You don't have to like superhero stories. Werewolves and wizards, capes and spandex might not be your first choice in entertainment. Nonetheless, our culture—in this moment in time —is creating or re-creating superheroes like never before.

Humans do this. From the prehistoric cave paintings in Lascaux to the Gilgamesh Epic, from the Bhagavad Gita to Beowulf, we have been telling stories about heroes and superheroes. Good stories will tell about another world and all the while speak to the everyday world of the audience. Whether subtle or overt, stories make claims about the nature of our present reality precisely through these fantastical tales.

Mark is no different. Mark is a story teller. Mark might have even invented a new genre of storytelling—a “Gospel.” Mark tells the story—the good news—of Jesus, the Son of God. The good news, according to Mark, is about the reality of another world—the Kingdom of God—alive in this world through Jesus from Galilee.

If you will allow me an anachronism, Mark is a superhero story. A story about another world—the Kingdom of God—and yet about our world. This Kingdom of God, for Mark, was a boundary-breaking reality and a Kingdom that calls us—that’s right, us here at Morningside Presbyterian Church and all who would follow Jesus—to enter the story.

In our present age, with our anxieties and fears, we have created heroes to save us. Yet these stories reveal a culture in trouble. Mark tells us of his hero Jesus and this Kingdom of God, unexpected and alive and with a challenging word for us today. It may be a superhero story, but Mark’s gospel is unlike anything you will read or see today.

First, then let’s understand a superhero story, to understand the culture and context that produces them. Stories are always contextual, located in history, in a culture. As we will see, Mark’s gospel came at a certain time, written to a certain audience. Classic stories are the exception that proves the rule—a story from another time that still speaks to us today. I wasn’t alive in the 60s or through most of the Cold War. The real threat of nuclear war produced art and films reflective of the anxiety during that time. Films like *The Manchurian Candidate* and *Dr. Strangelove* could only have come out of that time.

So if we are in the age of the superhero, why? What is it about our time, our culture, where these particular stories speak to us? Superheroes seem to come out when certain conditions are present.

Some of you of a certain age might remember the superhero stories from the 30s and 40s. Flash Gordon and The Phantom and Superman were born during this time. This was the Great Depression and the rise of Hitler and the Third Reich. A time of fear, anxiety, and powerlessness. In the 30s and early 40s, America watched, disgusted but doing nothing, as Nazism rolled

through Europe. The world was an uncertain and scary place and we couldn't seem to do anything about it. But Captain America can! Released in 1941, the first issue of the comic book featured Captain American punching Adolph Hitler in the jaw. How cathartic!

We are in a similar place in this country today. Instead of the Great Depression, we've got the Great Recession. For the first time in our nation's history, the certainty that the next generation will be better off than the previous is gone. In one fell swoop. 9-11 shattered our sense of invulnerability. With Guantanamo and Abu Graib, we have lost our moral leadership. The rich get richer and the poor get poorer. And Mother Earth suffers.

This world is too much to bear. Who are our enemies? We are overwhelmed, anxious.

Enter the Superheroes! Our caped saviors have super powers to fight evil—faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, able to leap tall buildings in a single bound!

We command that Hollywood create a mythic world for us to live in, if only for a few hours. We create our superheroes to swoop in to protect us from disaster. The world outside is complex and confusing and frightening. But when the lights go down and the curtain goes up, the lines between good guy and bad guy are crystal clear. We fear the evil and our saviors vanquish it.

There's a reason that Hollywood is recession-proof. To be sure, there is a real place for fantasy, for release from anxiety.

But this all comes at a price.

Our artistic creations reveal much about who we are. The worlds we create speak to our fears in this anxious world. We are a polarized culture. A culture that produces heroes to fight our mythic battles produces black-and-white thinking. The now-perpetual political election cycles show us daily that civil discourse and respect for legitimate differences of opinion are all but extinct. We are a black-and-white culture. Our culture that produces pure heroes also produces pure villains. The insiders are over here, the outsiders over there. The people with documents go here, the

people who came before there were documents, go there. Our culture creates demons and the demons are always the powerless—lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender people, Muslim people, poor people, Black people, undocumented people, homeless people, people with mental illnesses and disabilities. The list goes on.

Finally, we are drawn into these battles ourselves. Our heroes kill for us, lest we be killed. And we seem to have adopted that same mentality. We are a violent people. School shootings don't even shock us anymore. We wage war and our soldiers come home broken. Ultra-violent video games dominate our young male minds.

So all that glitters on celluloid and Blu-ray is not gold. But fear not. Mark has another kind of superhero for us. Jesus the Son of God.

So who is Mark's Jesus? What kind of hero is he?

Let's look again at Mark's story, what I'm calling our superhero story. Incidentally, I believe the good news of Mark to be the inspired word of God. And yet it is also a story, a particular story. Today we have a nicely bound book we call "The Bible." But 2000 years ago, there was the Torah, and there were preachers like Paul traveling all around, and oral stories being told about Jesus, some of which were written down. Mark's story was one of those written down.

Mark's gospel was written somewhere around 40 years after Jesus' death. At this time, there were many early Christian communities around the Roman world. Mark's community was experiencing persecution. There was a four-year Jewish-Roman war just ending, where Solomon's Temple—the center of Jewish-Christian life—was destroyed by the Romans. Jews were driven into exile out of Palestine into surrounding regions. The people were afraid and helpless.

Given that context, let's look again at our passage today. Two weeks ago Baron preached about Jesus' pronouncement that the Kingdom of God was very close and about the call for Repentance—the turn around to the new life that is right behind us. And last week you heard

about Fish Stories, about the ways in which Jonah and Peter, Andrew, James and John were called and followed God.

Our passage today immediately follows the calling of these disciples. So Jesus and his new friends go into the synagogue and he starts teaching on the Sabbath. See, you weren't supposed to do that. To make matters worse, Jesus casts out a demon on the Sabbath, which was strictly forbidden on that day. The religious culture of the time said there were rules and codes to be followed, that there were people who were clean and people who were not. Good guys and bad guys. These unclean people were separated from God and from their community. But Jesus has none of this. The Kingdom of God was very close and if someone needed healing—if someone was cut off from God and their full humanity—then Jesus broke through with wild grace.

Brian Blount of Union Presbyterian Seminary, talks about this “boundary-breaking” nature of the kingdom. In Jesus, the boundaries between God and humanity and among humankind had been broker, ripped apart in fact. Mark makes extensive use of a literary framing device called a “sandwich.” This is where he starts a story, only to interrupt with another—related—story, then finishes the first story. We see that in the passage today. Jesus enters the synagogue to teach—is interrupted by a man with an unclean spirit, casts out the spirit—then finishes his teaching.

Mark uses another “sandwich” to speak about the boundary-breaking Kingdom of God. Mark uses the Greek word *schizo*, “to rip open”, only twice in his gospel. In the first chapter, if you remember when Jesus is baptized by John, the heavens—that great buffer zone between the divine and the earthly—are “ripped open”—*schizo*—allowing the power of God to flow down. At the end of Mark's Gospel, when Jesus cries his last breath on the cross, the curtains in the Temple are “ripped open.” The barrier curtain that separated God—in the Holy of Holies—from humanity was a barrier no more. God is on the loose.

Further, throughout Mark's gospel, Jesus not only heals the unclean but touches them, making himself unclean. Blount points out that Jesus embraces tax collectors and sinners, “places the matter of human wholeness and healing above allegiance to law”, and proclaims that “the powerful reality of the (Kingdom) of God is as available to Gentiles as it is to Jews.” Jesus

partied with the cowards and traitors, hung out with Muslims, and had breakfast with hookers and alcoholics on Ponce. An upside-down Kingdom and a very strange hero indeed.

Unlike our modern superheroes, Mark's strange superhero Jesus calls us into the action. Superman and Batman and Spiderman do the work for us. Humans are frail and not needed.

Not the case with the Mark's story of Jesus. We, the followers of Jesus, are crucial to the story. And not because of our superpowers but because of our weakness. Jesus chose as his disciples Galileans. Not New Yorkers or Chicagoans. But small-town Iowans, corn farmers. Galilee was a kind of backwater region, certainly no movers and shakers like there were in Jerusalem. Jesus chose a bunch of po-dunk followers who faltered, misunderstood, and fell asleep when Jesus counted on them most. And yet those were the people he needed.

Another of Mark's literary sandwiches encompasses the entire gospel. The first part is Jesus calling the disciples in Galilee. He then embarks on his mission to Jerusalem, suffers, and is crucified. If you remember, Peter and the male disciples are crushed, disillusioned, deny Jesus and run away after he is dead. But that's not the end. The final part of the story is when the women go to Jesus' tomb and find it empty, and are told "Jesus has risen. He is not here. He is going ahead of you to Galilee."

Galilee—Jerusalem—Galilee.

This is how Mark's superhero story begins and end—we meet Jesus in Galilee.

So what is the Good News for us today? We remain an anxious people in a difficult time. Friends, family, and loved ones are struggling. Uncertainties remain in the world. But Mark has Good News for us.

Go to the movies. It's really ok. But be discerning with your art and entertainment. Watch close and see what world we are creating in our movies and books. Is it God's boundary-breaking Kingdom? Does it separate us? Does it set us up against them, the good versus the enemy. As followers of Jesus, let's tell the world another story of God. We are a frightened and polarized and violent people—we are in desperate need of Good News.

Mark tells us God is at work in the world—breaking through the boundaries that would divide us from ourselves, from God, and from each other. No more enemies. No in-group, out-group. In Jesus, we are all insiders, all children of God. This is an ontological reality that cannot be won or lost. And it's true of your enemies.

In Jesus, God has not held anything back, but gave all of himself, even to death, that we may know the love that knows no boundaries or divisions. This would never fly in Hollywood, but victory was not the slaughter of the enemy but the giving of God's own self in death. Death—that great demon—was no boundary for Jesus, who passed through death to new life. Death has lost its sting.

And you know who Jesus calls to live out this Kingdom in the world? Us. The Church. So let's get to it. Let's make our politics and economics and our art reflect a new day. Our superhero calls us and shows us a different reality. Where the sick are healed. The homeless have homes. The hungry have food. And the weak are the most valuable.

Jesus called a bunch of rag-tag, imperfect, blockheaded, po-dunk disciples from Galilee. And he calls you to meet him in Galilee again.

Pretty good story, huh?

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.*