

“Heroes & Monsters”

The Rev Drew Willard
UCC at The Villages, FL
June 24th, 2012

I Sam. 17:41-50

Mark 4:35-41

[David said,]

‘...the whole world will know that Israel has a real God.

Everybody here will see that the LORD doesn’t need swords
or spears to save his people.’

I Sam. 17:46b-47a

Let us pray... O God,

May we be willing to traverse the wastelands of ignorance and
be the hero that is so desperately needed everywhere.

Amen

Love that story about Jesus calming the storm at sea,
but I wouldn’t want to be in an open boat when that was happening.

Still, I know I can sure make a mountain out of a molehill
because of my imagination.

Imagination can be both a blessing and a curse;

It can create monsters and give them power they don’t deserve.

And it can create heroes – but they can become a problem, too,
if you let the metaphor take over and limit your life.

Both can serve to teach us how to confront problems as challenges for growth –
just like the mythic hero who must confront the arch-fiend in its lair.

A few years back I happened to turn on the TV and watch a rerun

of “The Man From UNCLE” – a 1960s adventure series about spies.

I was amazed at how silly it was and wondered why I ever bothered watching it –
and I never missed a show, if I could help it.

But then I realized it was the characters – Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin,
and the actors who played them that had been so appealing to me.

Apart from the storyline, the characters themselves had a life of their own.

“I’ll be back!” and “Hasta la vista, baby” – that’s all I would have to say,
and you’d instantly know I’m talking about Arnold Schwarzenegger –
even if you never saw his “Terminator” movies.

“Look! Up in the sky... It’s a bird! It’s a plane! No, it’s Superman!”

This past week, National Public Radio aired an interview with an author
who wrote about the origins of the comic book hero, “Superman”.

Jerry Siegel had been bullied as a youth and he would turn to his imagination
to find some escape from his feelings of powerlessness.

So, he wrote about “The Super-man” who was a bigger bully to bully the bullies.

And Jerry had a friend who could draw, named Joe Shuster –

who himself had bad eyesight, wearing glasses
like the bottoms of Coke bottles (remember those?).

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Jerry's father owned a clothing store and one day, three young men
shoplifted some clothing and ran out;

Jerry's father chased them – but died of a massive heart attack.

That night, the little boy took out his notebook at bedside
and began to write about *Superman* – who was kind and gentle,
but strong enough to fight bad guys
and help good people like his father had been.

These children were Jewish and so, their culture –
as well as that of the Christian culture around them,
influenced the storyline to have similarities
with Moses – and very likely, Christ, too.

And women have their own action heroes on a par with men
like Wonder Woman, Superwoman, and Catwoman.

Sigourney Weaver as Ripley in the “Alien” series emerged on movie posters
looking buff in a T-shirt, with bandoliers and machine gun like Rambo.

And there have been various goddesses and warrior-women
from sagas, sacred myths, and pulp fiction –
and then there's Joan of Arc from our Church's history.

Lately, there have been movies about the origins of superheroes
like Spiderman, Batman, and even James Bond –
showing how they became heroes.

And these heroes are grittier and tougher
because bad guys have evolved to become even more vicious.

Dorothy of “The Wizard of Oz” faced a terrible enemy,
the Wicked Witch of The West – but that witch seems almost quaint
compared to Harry Potter's nemesis, Lord Voldemort,
a wizard so terrible that witches were afraid even to say his name.

Such movies are like traditional fairytales which are often very violent –
like “The 3 Little Pigs” or “Jack & The Beanstalk”,
yet serve to help children come to terms with frightening realities.

And perhaps for this reason, those nasty bad guys in popular movies these days
have become more monstrous and even the good guys are more ruthless,
because we are living in a world that is still very much at war
with people being blown up or tortured.

As I said, “Superman” started out that way as a brutal bully
who came from the imagination of a bullied, little boy,
but then became transformed to a gentle hero who was still strong.

Kind of like Jesus...

“Gentle Jesus, Meek and Mild” who was also the Son of David.

Willard, p.3

Hear these words from a children's poem Charles Wesley wrote about Jesus;

*Gentle Jesus, meek and mild, Look upon a little child;
Pity my simplicity, Suffer me to come to Thee...
Hold me fast in Thine embrace, Let me see Thy smiling face,
Give me, Lord, Thy blessings give, Pray for me, and I shall live.
Lamb of God, I look to Thee, Thou shalt my example be;
Thou art gentle, meek, and mild, Thou wast once a little child.
Fain I would be as Thou art, Give me Thy obedient heart;
Thou art pitiful and kind, Let me have Thy loving mind...*

That's nice, but could this Jesus stand up to The Wicked Witch, Voldemort, Alien, Osama Bin Laden, Adolf Hitler, Saddam Hussein, or whoever or whatever has been your own personal boogey-man? Answer? Yes, 'for the Bible tells [us] so.'

We have to remember that monsters and heroes alike get magnified out of proportion.

But who is this Jesus really that even the wind and the sea listen up to him?

Jesus Christ comes to us from stories of the Bible and Church tradition;

He might seem like a literary figure, but it is a point of faith as to whether or not he is a model of a hero or the archetype itself – the one whom all heroes represent.

As the Son of God, he is the source, but as the Son of Man – the true heir of humanity, he is our accessible example as someone who had to take his lumps just like everybody else.

One of the stories Jesus would have learned as a child growing up in a Jewish household, is the story of David and Goliath.

The Philistines and the Israelites were competitors for the same land – just like the Palestinians and the Israelis.

One day, the Philistines brought out a secret weapon who was hard to miss – Goliath the Giant from Gath.

Nobody on the Israelite side dared to approach him though each day he stepped into the no man's land and shouted insults. David was a kid, then, and sent from home with goodies for his brothers who were in the army.

When David first heard Goliath, he was indignant, and it got around to the king that this kid wanted to get out there and show Goliath who was boss – or rather who was the Israelites' God.

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At first, they tried to outfit him in adult armor, but it was too big and clumsy;
So, he went out to confront the giant with what he knew best –
he went out as himself...

When we are finally ready to confront the arch-fiend in our lives,
we are able to see the person behind their scary mask,
even find empathy for our enemy without excusing their actions.
They may be clever and strong, but they are mortal and not as big as we thought;
Our fears magnify the monster while our hopes magnify the hero
and we get into trouble either way,
to be paralyzed or to be disappointed when we let the metaphor take over.

To be like Christ is not to be the all-powerful superman,
but to be more truly human ourselves.

When Jesus said to the disciples,
'Don't you have any faith yet?'

He was really saying,

"You're all experienced fishermen.

I believe in you. Why don't you believe in yourselves?"

Yet he addressed their fears – and their lack of faith,
by standing up to scold the wild wind that was like an evil spirit,
and calm the sea just like he put their emotions at ease.

Jesus was simply acting and responding to the world as who he was
and setting the example for his followers to do the same.

Consider the practical example of an actual hero, Josef Miles.

Just as a bullied little boy used his imagination to create "Superman",
compare this with the imaginative – and heroic words of a little boy
who challenged the bigotry of a Westboro Baptist demonstration.

That is the extremist church in Kansas that shows up
at funerals of American troops killed in action,
protesting our nation's policies on behalf of gay & lesbian people,
with hateful signs that are notorious for obscenities.

A little boy named Josef Miles happened to be there with his mother
and when he heard that these church people were holding signs
that God hates men who love men and women who love women,
he took out his notebook and wrote in it with big letters:
'GOD HATES NO ONE.'

And when he was asked why he wrote it, he said,
'Because it's true.'

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His mother photographed him holding up his sign
with the Westboro adults and their signs in the background
and that picture 'went viral on the Internet' as we say these days.

Josef did what grown up people of goodwill have not been able to do easily –
he used written words of love to be a bigger story that day,
drowning out the Westboro Baptists' words of hate.

Something similar happened at General Synod of the UCC which met
at Kansas City, MO in 2001.

Westboro protestors were there, too, with signs just as hateful back then;
We had been told to ignore them, but the teenagers didn't listen.

I saw them walk up to these protestors – to talk;
and later, I learned that a youth group from a UCC church in the mid West
got out there with strecthalk and left messages
of peace and "God is love" where the protestors had been standing.

Maybe they didn't change anything in the short term,
but it was still the right thing to do.

Overcome evil with good. Overcome evil's lies with the truth you know.
Overcome evil in your life by being yourself – just like Jesus.

Amen

Our lesson from I Samuel 17:41-50 describes the confrontation between David and Goliath in single combat, and how David prevailed by trusting God and doing what he knew best.

- ⁴¹ Goliath came toward David,
walking behind the soldier who was carrying his shield.
- ⁴² When Goliath saw that David was just a healthy, good-looking boy,
he made fun of him.
- ⁴³ “Do you think I’m a dog?” Goliath asked.
“Is that why you’ve come after me with a stick?”
He cursed David in the name of the Philistine gods ⁴⁴ and shouted,
“Come on! When I’m finished with you,
I’ll feed you to the birds and wild animals!”
- ⁴⁵ David answered:
You’ve come out to fight me with a sword and a spear and a dagger.
But I’ve come out to fight you in the name of the LORD All-Powerful.
He is the God of Israel’s army,
and you have insulted him too!
- ⁴⁶ Today the LORD will help me defeat you.
I’ll knock you down and cut off your head,
and I’ll feed the bodies of the other Philistine soldiers
to the birds and wild animals.
Then the whole world will know
that Israel has a real God.
- ⁴⁷ Everybody here will see that the LORD doesn’t need swords or spears
to save his people.
The LORD always wins his battles, and he will help us defeat you.
- ⁴⁸ When Goliath started forward, David ran toward him.
⁴⁹ He put a rock in his sling and swung the sling around by its straps.
When he let go of one strap, the rock flew out and hit Goliath on the forehead.
It cracked his skull, and he fell facedown on the ground.
- ⁵⁰ David defeated Goliath with a sling and a rock.
He killed him without even using a sword.

Inspired by Mark 4:35-41

And Jesus said to his disciples,

“Though it is late in the day,

let’s cross over to the other side of the Galilee,”

So, they took him aboard their boat just as he was

as other boats accompanied them.

Then, a tempest was formed by strong winds

sending waves rolling over into the boat so that it was flooded!

But Jesus was in the stern, on the cushion, exhausted.

And the disciples roused him saying,

“Rabbi! Teacher! Don’t you care that we are sinking?”

And getting up, Jesus scolded the wind and said to the sea,

“Silence, I say! Be silent...”

And the wind died down and the sea became calm –

became the great, calm Galilee again.

And Jesus said to them,

“Why are you so nervous? Don’t you have any faith yet?”

But they were terrified with great fear and said to one another,

“So who is this really that even the wind and the sea
listen up to him!”