

Truth, Justice, and the Way of Creative Peace
20th Sunday after Pentecost
October 7, 2018
Trinity Bixby
Rev. Lucas Levy Keppel

[Job 1:1, 2:1-10 \(NLT\)](#)

[Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:10-12 \(CEB\)](#)

The year is 1933. Two Jewish men – children of immigrants to the United States – sit down at a drafting desk, and put together the first sketch of the character that would be the first modern superhero. At least, that’s the legend. These two men – Joe Schuster and Jerome Siegel – had been friends since high school, writing and drawing comic strips for the school paper. Once they graduated, lacking the money for college and not particularly wanting follow their fathers in the tailoring trade, they learned that many newspapers around the country were seeking comic strips, and would pay very well indeed – the top twenty strips made their creators \$1,000 a week, even in the height of the depression. So, they pulled ideas from some of their earlier comic strips, and combined them with a different twist – an alien whose human identity was the mask instead of the other way around.

Now, you’re likely aware of their creation, Superman, but here’s a bit of background, just in case. He is an undocumented immigrant, arriving as an alien baby, and raised by a couple from Kansas. He blends in with society as best he can, and ends up reporting for a newspaper in the biggest city in America. He struggles with his identity – who is he really, the immigrant or the Kansas farm boy? – and falls in love with a fellow reporter, Lois Lane, who is... indifferent to him. As part of his identity crises, “Clark Kent” uses his gifts to help the people of metropolis while wearing his ancestral crest proudly, but hiding his identity as the reporter. When physically reminded of his origin by a rock from his homeland, he becomes weak and nauseated, and loses many of his special gifts. Those gifts are wide ranging, originally including speed, strength, and a terrifically tall jump, but later “improved” with flight, heat, and x-ray vision, cold breath, and nigh-invulnerability.

Yet none of these physical gifts, which are taken away by the kryptonite rock, are even close to his true gift – his ability to maintain morality in the face of difficult choices. Not even his greatest weakness can take that from him, and it's the one gift that is instilled by his adopted parents, rather than his alien origins. This is the true super-power of Superman – his morality.

Siegel and Shuster talk about Superman being a wish-fulfillment character for them – someone who, despite his differences, was able to live, work, and be praised in society for his actions. Many critics call Superman an attempt to explain assimilation to the American populace, for both the good and the bad of it. Many of his early adventures are clearly influenced by the Great Depression, and the struggles of being different. Shuster, the artist, had vision that got progressively worse, and often had to wear a wrist brace to support his arm. He was known for his thick glasses. Siegel, the writer, had a high-pitched squeaky voice, and struggled with romantic interactions, especially with an infatuation with a woman named Lois.

In the close of the 1930s, during the ramp up to the second World War, Superman went off to fight the Nazis – and the Navy started to include Superman comics in their recommendations for care packages. But after World War II, there were suddenly many fewer major enemies for Superman to face – the Nazis were no longer a threat, and the Communist USSR hadn't loomed large in the public imagination. Still, there was a major threat within America, and that was a resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan.

In 1945, a man named William Stetson Kennedy had been undercover in the KKK, collecting their secret codes and doctrines. He tried, again and again, to leak them to newspapers, police, and even congress, but was either laughed out, or told point-blank that “the KKK is an old American institution, and there's nothing to be done.” Struggling to come up with an answer, Stetson Kennedy came up with a brilliant solution – he'd leak the information to the Superman radio drama writers and producers. Unlike the official channels, the radio dramatists were only too happy to have a new villain for Superman to face, and they ran a series of sixteen

episodes, exposing the secret handshakes and details of the clan to the eager listening audience. Superman's heroics were a part of the story, of course, but it was the newspaper chief, Perry White, who had much of the center stage, writing editorials and exposes, intentionally showing how ordinary people could stand up to hatred. You see, in exposing hatred to the light, the Superman radio series actually helped stop the KKK from growing larger. It didn't change everything immediately, of course, but it helped to bring a "creative peace" – that is, a peace resulting from creation, a building up of people and a morality that positively affected many.

By the time Superman transitioned from the radio to the television, they had a new tagline: "Defender of Truth, Justice, and the American Way" – where "American Way" meant moral and good. Now, there was in the ancient world a tradition of "superheroes" who lifted up moral and good decisions, as well. One of these was simply named, Job. The Biblical story of Job is based on an older legend yet, one that has parallel stories in Egypt, Edom, Syria, Arabia, and even as far as India! Now, the fact that Job opens with a "Once upon a time" beginning is no coincidence. The author of Job – anonymous though he is – is retelling old stories with a specific purpose. That's at least partially the reason that Job opens so strangely – Carol Bechtel puts it this way:

If one takes the prologue to Job literally, there are questions [about God's omniscience] that will not go away. Yet, if one accepts... this book as being a work of theologically informed literature, the divine "image problem" becomes less of a stumbling block. It's as if the author is saying to us, "Just imagine something like this happening. I'm not saying that it did happen or that it does. But just imagine it for a moment."¹

Many people think that the purpose of the story of Job is to explain suffering, or what theologians call "teleology," the study of evil. But the issue at the heart of Job isn't the suffering he experiences, it's his faith in God. Just as morality is Superman's true superpower, so is Job's true superpower his constant faith. It

¹ Carol M. Bechtel, *Job and the Life of Faith: Wisdom for Today's World*. The Kerygma Program, Pittsburgh, PA (2004)

doesn't waver, no matter how much the Adversary takes away. Throughout the course of the book, he loses his family, his wealth, his health – you know, all those things that so-called “prosperity-Gospel” preachers say God will grant you if you follow God. And Job loses it all precisely because he is a dedicated follower of God!

Job isn't blind to what's happening. In the prologue, we learn about a celestial bargain between God and the Adversary – “Ha Satan” in Hebrew – where God grants the Adversary the right to sicken Job. And so, Job falls victim to a skin disease – boils, a rash, or something similar – and we find him in a pit of ashes, just outside of town, when his wife sees him scraping at his skin with broken pottery.

There's a reason that Job is covering himself in ashes. Wood ash – so long as it's cold, and never touched by water – is strongly alkaline. That means it can act a bit like calamine lotion, relieving itching and pain from various skin conditions. Since Job is “covered all over from the soles of his feet to the crown of his head,” the only way he can find any relief is to be in the ash pit entirely. And the potsherds, they're used like a back-scratching stick today, to reach further than your hands can do alone.

So. Job is covered in ashes, miserable, scratching at his itchy skin, and his wife comes up to him. They've lost a lot – and it makes sense that she'd be upset. So, she simply tells him, “Curse God and die!” I know this sounds harsh – and it is – but I think she's trying to help. To her, if the god you worship can't or won't protect you from these indignities, then death is a preferable option. Job responds that she's acting like a depraved woman, a woman without faith in God. Then he says our key verse: “Are we to accept the good that comes from God, but not accept the bad?”

Job isn't calmly accepting his fate – he's upset, and doing what he can to relieve the pain and trouble. But he's also not giving up his faith in the process. That steady faith is the reason that Job is lifted up as a Superhero of the ancient world. No matter what happens, how his friends torment him, or claim that he's being punished for something he did wrong, Job withstands it all. He creates peace in a difficult situation. He creates peace through conversations with his three

friends and his wife, helping them to understand faith, and to see why his convictions are strong, but also listening to them and hearing their concerns.

In some ways, Job ends up being a prototype Messiah. His faith – even in the midst of extreme difficulty and suffering – is. In some ways, Superhero Job points the way to the true Superhero – the true Messiah – Jesus. As Jesus is described in the book of Hebrews, “It was appropriate for God, for whom and through whom everything exists, to use experiences of suffering to make perfect the pioneer of salvation. This salvation belongs to many sons and daughters whom he’s leading to glory.” You see, the Messiah was not a wealthy, powerful man like Lex Luthor or King Herod – he was a heavenly child, raised by mortal parents whose morality was a beacon in the darkness, a light shed on the evils of the world that reduced their power, and eventually overcame death itself.

Whenever we celebrate communion, like we do today, we remember Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. We tell the story of God’s own son, who ate with immigrants, outcasts, strangers, and government agents – and who was killed for fear of his gaining power. Yet, he showed the world that even death could not hold back God. That God can overcome any adversary – and that hope is possible.

Shirley Guthrie puts it this way:

[Acting] on the memory of God’s self-giving love... [shows] God’s presence in people who love enough to risk their own comfort and security to sit at the side of the sick and dying, befriend the friendless, accept the unacceptable, help those who cannot help themselves, and defend the cause of the victims of injustices.²

This is how we can participate in the Truth, Justice, and Way of Creative Peace – to stand with those suffering, rather than against them. To befriend those who are alone. To stand against the center with those at the margins.

To act as God would have us act. In the faith of Job. With the morality of Superman. And through the love of Jesus Christ. That is the Way of creative peace. Amen.

² Shirley C. Guthrie Jr. *Christian Doctrine*, revised edition. Westminster John Knox, Louisville, KY (1994)