

Baptized with the Spirit

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Who is your favorite superhero? At Christmas I was with my grandson, Gabriel, and great nephew, Christopher; they are 5 and 6 years old respectively. If I remember correctly Gabriel is the Spiderman fan and Christopher is the fan of Batman. A few days ago I saw a portion of the movie: *The Incredible Hulk*. In every story there is something that activates the power of the superhero. Who was or is your superhero?

In my Bible reading this week I am reading Samuel. This man was the great prophet/judge of Israel. During the time he was judge the people demanded a king to lead them and help them fight their enemies. In our country we don't have a king, but we do elect a president and we do look to that person to rescue us from what ails us. It does not matter whether we call our rescuer superhero, king or president; we want someone to help us.

The Hebrews expected a Messiah to come and save them from destruction, leading the nation into a new political and religious future. John the Baptist, who was already preaching, baptizing, and collecting many disciples, was considered to be a logical candidate (John 1:35-38). But then came Jesus—also preaching, teaching, and baptizing. Behind the self-abnegating voice of John the Baptist was a swirl of intrigue and controversy. Leadership of this radical movement must be clearly identified: Will the real Messiah please stand up!

Jesus was born *from* and *into* a world of systemic sin, and his baptism was a signal that he understood the full implications of the incarnation. He did not merely identify with or show solidarity with the human world; he

fully acknowledged our tragic structure. There are no innocent, no perfect, no unambiguous, no controllable, indeed no sinless, choices in this world. All our choices are within a context of a system that precedes and impinges upon us.

Marjorie Suchocki's wrote about sin in her book, *Fall to Violence*. She opened the book with reflections on her experience serving as jurist in a case where the defendant was found guilty. Although she believed that the individual committed the crime for which he was convicted, after the trial was over she began to reflect on her own place in the system that formed and eventually indicted this man. As a member of this interrelated system, she felt she had some relation to the man's crime.

It is the same with us. The sorry world of the crack house... seems so distant from most of us. But in truth, that "other" world is only a few miles from our homes. Where did that world start, and where did it stop? "Our" world is geographically close, but have we ever intentionally done anything at all to touch the lives in that "other" world? Are we only involved to judge its inhabitants? Or is there not a sense in which we are participants in that world as well as our own, even if that participation is as an absentee neighbor? In fact, Suchocki has reframed the concept of "original sin" as that "which precedes us bending us willy-nilly against inclusive good"

It is a question worth asking whether our churches truly identify with sinners and are willing to get in line with them, to welcome and work for them as brothers and sisters in Christ. The church may say all the right words, declaring that we are hospitals for sinners and refuges for those who have lost their way, but too often we may send the message that respectable, successful folks are the ones we need to build up our communities. Time and again people who encounter difficulties in life drop out of our churches, seek

help from other caregivers, and return to church only after they feel they can be recertified as respectable, churchgoing people. Jesus got in line with sinners and was baptized with them. This is worth knowing and remembering!

Jesus as the superhero lived among the sinful members of this world. In the midst of that life Jesus was baptized. Luke wanted us to understand both that Jesus' will was aligned with God's and that Jesus understood the tragic structure of the world. He is, indeed, "the son of Adam, the son of God" (v. 38). **Carol Lakey Hess**

Luke reminds us clearly that Jesus' baptism took place after other people have been baptized. No special ritual designed just for Jesus happened here. He stood in line with the others patiently waiting for John to baptize all of them with water. Jesus' baptism did not set him apart from the others. Jesus looked and acted like everyone else, but what was special was Jesus' focus on prayer. Jesus prayed after he is baptized (3:21). Jesus received his power from the Holy Spirit through the act of prayer. It was the presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of Jesus and ultimately, the believer that makes us children of God.

Prayer was always the focus of Jesus' ministry (5:16; 6:12; 9:18, 28ff.; 11:1; 22:41; 23:46). **Linda Mckinnish Bridges** Jesus prayed before he called his disciples (6:12), before asking them who he was (9:18), at the time of his transfiguration (9:29), before teaching his disciples how to pray (11:1), on the night of his arrest (22:41), and at his death (23:46). What was begun in baptism was lived out through the practice of prayer by which He received the Holy Spirit. Just as Jesus was empowered for and guided in his ministry through prayer, so too are his followers, down to this day.

It is worth asking whether we, as a church, depend upon the Holy Spirit and our connection to God in prayer for the spiritual stamina to go into the world and make a difference in people's lives through Christ. This connection remains the lifeline of every disciple, every congregation, and every ministry. It is significant that this intensely spiritual experience following Jesus' baptism happens while he is in the posture of prayer.

Are we, the church, sustained by knowing that God claims us as his children and is proud of us for bringing God's love to all people. John Leith, a professor and theologian, liked to say that every human life is rooted in the will and intention of God: "In baptism the child's name is called because our faith is that God thought of this child before the child was, that God gave to this child an identity, an individuality, a name, and a dignity that no one should dare abuse. Human existence has its origin not in the accidents of history and biology, but in the will and the intention of the Lord God, creator of heaven and earth."

What is characteristic of Jesus is also be characteristic of the church. In the Acts of the Apostles, we see the church in prayer as they wait for the promised coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8, 14). And after the promised Spirit came upon them at Pentecost (with wind and fire!), they continued the regular practice of prayer (Acts 2:42; 3:1; 4:31; 6:4; 12:5, 12; 13:3; 14:23; 20:36; 21:5). As for the revelatory message of the voice from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (3:22). This message was directed to Jesus as God's Son. We need to hear this affirmation from God, and we need to hear it from each other. These are life-giving words that every human being upon this earth should hear: "You are my child, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." When Jesus heard those words, they changed his life forever. They will do the same for our children, our

neighbors, our spouses, our church members, and, Jesus promised, even our enemies. **Robert M. Brearley**

Yes, Jesus is the Messiah, our superhero. However, this powerful affirmation is for every follower of Christ: "You are my son, my daughter." "You are Beloved." "I am well pleased with you." The good news is that in Christ we are all the Beloved. **Ernest Hess** To activate the power that God has given us we need to be a people of prayer and allow the Holy Spirit to do his great work in and through us. Amen.

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