MAN OF STEEL
Sermon Notes

“JESUS - THE ORIGINAL SUPERHERO”

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Two high school students, Jerry Siegel and Joel Shuster, created Superman in the 1930s. As the sons of Jewish immigrants, they had experienced plenty of hard times and persecution. They knew what it felt like to be viewed as an outsider, on the margins of society.

Superman first appeared in Action Comics #1 in 1938, way before Spider-Man or the X-Men or The Avengers. On the heels of an economic depression, amidst ongoing threats of war, our nation longed for a hero to intervene.

For Americans unsure about our place in this world, Superman provided red, white, and blue reassurance. He was sent by his father on a life-saving mission to earth. Raised in the heartland, by God-fearing parents, Clark Kent kept his extraordinary gifts under wraps until it was time to intervene. His true nature was hidden, disguised. But he quickly transformed into our superhero, a role model for kids of all ages.

This summer, our beloved Superman is back on the big screen in MAN OF STEEL, which opens June 14. The Man of Steel is stronger, faster, with an all-new suit. Money woes and danger remain high. We still need a Superman to fight our battles and protect us from harm. Seventy-five years after his first appearance in a comic book, Superman remains as relevant as ever, our greatest American superhero.

Superman’s mythical origins are rooted in the timeless reality of a spiritual superhero who also lived a modest life until extraordinary times required a supernatural response. Jesus was sent by his Father to bear our burdens, to right our wrongs, to rise above our troubling circumstances. How might the story of Superman awaken our passion for the greatest hero who ever lived and died and rose again? Let’s consider how Superman’s humble origins, his high calling, and his transforming sacrifice point us towards Jesus, the original superhero.
It is no mistake that the creators of Superman tapped into their Jewish roots to give him a majestic name. “El” is a Hebrew name for God, as in the Christmas hymn we sing, “O Come, O Come Emmanu-el,”—“God with us.” With the planet Krypton breaking up, Jor-El and his wife, send their baby away. Like Moses, placed in a basket, Kal-El is whisked towards earth for his safety and protection. Jor-El blesses little Kal-El, “Goodbye, my son. Our hopes and dreams travel with you.” His mother rightly worries, “He will be an outcast. They’ll kill him.” But Jor-El says no, “He’ll be a god to them.”

Jesus wasn’t just a god, but The God. As it says in Isaiah 9:6: “For unto us a Child is born, Unto us a Son is given; … And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

In the Gospel of John, we get the full gravity of Jesus’s calling, “Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God. The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” The power of Jesus’ life and ministry begins with the Incarnation, as the Message translation says, “The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood.”

Jesus isn’t a superhero from another planet. He is fully God and fully man, living in solidarity with us amidst our suffering.

The parallels to Superman as depicted in MAN OF STEEL are hard to miss. At a critical juncture in the film, as Kal-El is struggling with his identity, whether he should live life as a “normal” human or as the other worldly hero he was called to be, Jor-El tells him: “You are as much a child of Earth as you are of Krypton.” Jor-El did not just send his son to earth to save him from Krypton’s destruction, but for a far loftier purpose.
3.
A LOFTY CALLING

Kal-El lands on a rural farm, where a faithful couple, Jonathan and Martha Kent, find him. They love and raise him as their own son, Clark, but sense that he was sent for something far greater than farming. His powers are kept under wraps, his full identity remains a secret. Again, as you saw in the trailer, his father, Jonathan Kent (played by Kevin Costner), conveys the gravity of Clark’s lofty calling: “I have to believe that you were sent here for a reason. And even if it takes the rest of your life, you owe it to yourself to find out what that reason is.” Man of Steel is about Superman clarifying his calling, grasping the full scale of the responsibility set before him. It is about becoming a man of steely resolve.

Let's look at a short clip that zeroes in on this key theme of the film.

Jesus also lived much of his childhood in obscurity. His dual identity as fully God and fully man is kept a secret. Yet there is a clear purpose to these “alter ego” years in Jesus’ life. Living among humans, experiencing what we experience, ensures that there is nothing we encounter in this life that he has not first encountered. Consider Hebrews 4:15,16: “For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

What Jesus and Superman both give us, through their “hero” actions but also their “human” actions – is hope. In fact, when Lois Lane asks Kal-El what the “S” on the chest stands for, he explains it isn’t an “S” or a letter at all. It’s a Krytonian symbol for hope. Just as a Cross will become a Christian symbol for hope.
A COSTLY CHOICE

As Clark Kent grows into manhood, he leans into his calling. His gifts are a burden, something he may have wanted to avoid. But no amount of hiding on a fishing boat can obscure the fact that Kal-El was created for more. His father, Jonathan Kent told him, “You’re not just anyone. One day, you’re going to have to make a choice. You have to decide what kind of man you want to grow up to be. Whoever that man is, good character or bad, it’s going to change the world.” Superman must make an active choice to stand up for goodness in the face of evil.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus offered hints of his sacrificial calling. His parables, rooted in agriculture, may have initially sounded perplexing, for example, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life” (John 12:24-25). His disciples did not grasp the gravity of his teaching when he said things like “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28). Even today, words like ‘ransom’ may sound foreign to our ears.

Superman is confronted by a choice. General Zod, from Superman’s home planet of Krypton, comes to earth with vengeance on his mind. He offers an ultimatum, “To Kal-El, I say this: surrender within 24 hours, or watch this world suffer the consequences.” The potential for destruction is quite grave. Should Kal-El submit to such a formidable foe? Shouldn’t he stand and fight this intergalactic enemy? In making his decision, Superman turns to a priest for guidance.

Superman faces grave choices that may cost him his life for the sake of the planet. After he does turn himself in, he tells Lois Lane: “I'm not surrendering myself to Zod. I'm surrendering myself to mankind.” Sound like anyone you've read about in Scripture?

As we ponder the sacrifices Superman makes in the movie, it’s worth asking ourselves: What kinds of tough, costly decisions do we face? How much are we willing to sacrifice for others?

We find echoes of these agonizing choices in the garden of Gethsemane. Jesus engages in some soul searching. One of his disciples, Judas, had advocated armed rebellion against the Roman Army. Yet, Jesus pursues a different way, the way of the cross. It is a lonely road as the Gospel of Matthew makes clear, “And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, ‘My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.’” (Matthew 26:39).
Here we have the ultimate example of obedience. Although fully aware of the bloody cost, Jesus decides to willingly submit himself to Roman soldiers. Jesus is arrested and tried as a common criminal, sentenced to death for crimes he did not commit. He pays the price for our individual and collective sin. The One genuinely innocent man takes on the burden of a gravely fallen people.

The Man of Steel is faced with a similar test. Should he lay down his life for humanity? Do we deserve such sacrificial justice from Superman? The words of his father, Jor-El resonate, “You can save them...you can save all of them.” He places Superman’s life in context, “You will give the people an ideal to strive towards. They will race behind you, they will stumble, they will fall. But in time, they will join you in the sun. In time, you will help them accomplish wonders.”

This isn’t part of the three points that reveal Superman as an archetype of Jesus, but we’d be remiss if we didn’t pause, with Father’s Day coming up, and note the love, sacrifice and guidance of both Superman’s “heavenly” father – Jor-El – and his “earthly” father, Jonathan Kent. We could do a whole sermon on the way they support and shape their son as he walks out his calling – and all of us fortunate enough to be called “Dad” could learn a thing or two from the way the invest in Kal-El/Clark. But that’s a topic for a different day …

Meanwhile, back in Metropolis, Superman becomes an exemplar for all mankind to follow. He is a mythical role model.

C.S. Lewis notes how thrilling and inspiring such myths can be. Lewis wrote, “I suspect that men have sometimes derived more spiritual sustenance from myths they did not believe than from the religion they professed.” We love our superheroes. Yet, Jesus’s life, death and resurrection was far more than a myth. His sacrifice was far more than an example. It was the central act of history, the transformative moment when we were freed from the deadly stain of sin. One true superhero took on the collective guilt of humanity. Jesus carried such enormous, eternal weight upon his shoulders, bearing it upon the cross, one for all.
The Man of Steel shows us what sacrifice looks like in the mythical Metropolis. Jesus Christ shows us what sacrifice looks like in the historical Jerusalem. In his essay, “Myth Became Fact,” C.S. Lewis noted, “The heart of Christianity is a myth which is also a fact. The old myth of the Dying God, without ceasing to be myth, comes down from the heaven of legend and imagination to the earth of history. It happens – at a particular date, in a particular place, followed by definable historical consequences.”

The Apostle Paul put Jesus’s life and death in context, “Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:5-8). This is our high calling as followers of Jesus. When we watch superheroes like Kal-El engage in life saving sacrifice, they are following a trail blazed by the original superhero, Jesus the Christ. The challenge is to recognize the true myth residing behind our cinematic myths and legends. And moreover, to appropriate Jesus’ life giving sacrifice into our beliefs and practices.

We may want to soar like Superman, but most of the time, we feel quite earthbound. A movie like Man of Steel provides a thrilling picture of what sacrifice, duty, courage, and honor look like. It is a rousing story. Thankfully, a genuine superhero, Jesus Christ, intervened on our behalf. This perfect person made a complete sacrifice to save very imperfect people. Consider this concise summary of our faith, “This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 John 4:10). May we come to know, love, and follow the original superhero, Jesus.
MAN OF STEEL is rated PG-13 for intense sequences of sci-fi violence, action and destruction, and for some language.

These notes were prepared by Dr. Craig Detweiler, a professor of communication at Pepperdine University. He earned his Ph.D in Theology and Culture and his Master of Divinity degree from Fuller Theological Seminary and also holds a Master of Fine Arts in Cinema and TV from the University of Southern California. He is the author of Into the Dark: Seeing the Sacred in the Top Films of the 21st Century and iGods: How Technology Shapes Our Spiritual and Social Lives (Published this Fall).