

Sermon for Sunday, July 4, 2021 - "Empowered"

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

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Beloved People of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

It may make me sound uncultured and unintellectual, but I really love superhero movies. It started with Superman when I was a kid. My favorite uncle and I had a standing date to see every single *Superman* movie that came out. He didn't yet have kids and I realize now that he might have needed an excuse to go see a comic book movie, but I was always on cloud nine during those dates. Good vs. evil, a smart woman reporter, and my cool Uncle Mike? I was all in. My current favorite is the first *Wonder Woman* movie. She's so powerful and good and there's some great Lutheran theology at the end.

Superhero movies are a lot of fun. And sometimes I wish they were true. When people act like monsters and evil seems to lurk around every corner, when goodness looks to be on life support, could someone please just swoop in and save the day? If not a superhero, then how about Jesus? Could Jesus just make everything better, and quickly please?

As he heads into his hometown in our story today, Jesus looks a lot like a superhero. He calmed a storm, freed a man plagued by two thousand demons, healed a woman who was hemorrhaging for twelve years, and restored a little girl to life. He looks unstoppable. Yet the people in his hometown reject Jesus. The folks who've known him since birth aren't open to experiencing Jesus' healing and power among them. Instead, they snipe and critique and take offense and make catty comments about his unusual birth, saying he's the son of Mary while pointedly leaving out any reference to a father. Because of their disbelief, Jesus can do no deed of power there.

I don't understand this. It troubles me. I want Jesus to be all-powerful, all the time, to work hope and healing no matter what. Yet Jesus isn't some super-charged action figure. Throughout the Gospel of Mark, Jesus makes clear that his purpose is not to swoop in, do powerful things, and make everything right. Rather, Jesus' purpose is to announce that the Kingdom of God has come near and to empower us all to participate in that kingdom. It seems Jesus doesn't want us to just be passive recipients of his deeds of power; Jesus wants to make us agents of God's kingdom.

Recently my family has gotten into watching Marvel's *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* Marvel produced the *Avenger* superhero movies about Captain America, Iron Man, Captain Marvel, Black Panther - characters with superhuman powers fighting bad guys. I love those movies, but what I like about the *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* show is that it is mostly ordinary people who train and work together for the sake of the good.

That is our call as the church - to be a community that works as agents of God's kingdom. And God's kingdom is not about the supernatural, though sometimes it's portrayed that way. It is about our creator's intentions being realized. God longs for all of creation to know well-being and peace,

to live in harmony with God and all that God has made. Instead, we are driven by forces within and around us that lead us away from what God desires. The evil isn't just lurking in back alleys and in villains; it is within each of us. Jesus' work is to draw us into God's kingdom so that we will be healed and set free, so that we will live in God's ways and help to bring about God's well-being for all.

Sometimes this work of Jesus looks miraculous and dramatic: People are healed, storms are calmed, 5,000 are fed - stories fit for the big screen. Most often Jesus' work is more slow and subtle as he opens our unbelieving hearts and minds to new possibilities. Jesus relentlessly persists in this work, even when we aren't willing participants. When Jesus encounters rejection in his hometown, he doesn't plot revenge, he changes course. He focuses on training and sending his disciples.

In his instructions to them, we too are guided about how to live as agents of God's kingdom. Not surprisingly, we aren't to act as if we are heroes who stand in judgment above the world and use power to fix everyone else. We aren't to use force, coercion, or manipulation. Instead, we are to be vulnerable and dependent upon others. We are to enter people's hearts and lives. We are to take nothing to protect our hearts from them, but rather walk with them, learn and be loved and receive from them.

When we do this, others can live as participants in God's kingdom as they show care and welcome. When we do this, we and those who welcome us experience healing and freedom. As we do this work, we don't get a superhero, we don't get superpowers. We do get Jesus. We get Jesus who welcomes us, forgives us, and loves us always. We get Jesus who sends us out with real transformative power: the power of vulnerability, the power of grace, the power of welcome, the power of love. These are endlessly powerful gifts. They really do change things.

I see these powers at work in this congregation and in our church body, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). As a church, we are committed to the practice of accompaniment in this country and around the world. The practice of accompaniment means we don't swoop into places of pain saying, "We're here to save the day." Instead, we show up day in and day out over the long haul building relationships, walking with others and learning from them, working together so that more can experience well-being and wholeness.

This is what we are working to do as an AMMPARO congregation. We accompany our immigrant neighbors through legal clinics and community support efforts. The relationships that have developed through this work have been transformative for our neighbors and for Good Shepherd members.

This is what we're doing in supporting the Young Adults in Global Mission program in Hungary. Young adults who are sent there to serve others are also opened to a deeper sense of how to work for God's justice in the world.

This is how we're living as a Reconciling in Christ congregation. We're seeking to be a community in which trust and understanding grow between people of different backgrounds and identities, where together we practice living out kindness, respect, and compassion.

We don't have to wait for a hero to fix everything.
We don't have to try to protect ourselves from the pain of the world.

We are sent out to participate in the healing of creation by taking risks, extending welcome and following Jesus. As we live as participants in God's kingdom, we are healed and healing flows through us to others.

Beloved of God, you are forgiven, loved, and set free.
You have all that you need to live out God's love for the sake of the world.

Let's take a moment for prayer.