

“Superheroes” Hebr. 11, 12 (selected verses) 11/1/20

On our church Facebook page this week, we asked you to name some of your favorite superheroes. Here are a few that you submitted: The Hulk, Superman, Spiderman, Isis, Ironman, Thor, and Black Panther, as well as He-Man and Mighty Mouse! Tracey Stone submitted Wiley Coyote, who I never thought of as a superhero, but it does tell you something about the way Tracey thinks! Anyway, compare those heroes to the ones I found in a national poll of favorite superheroes that came out this year. Want to guess which ones were the most popular? Here are the top ten:

10. Wolverine

9. Black Panther

8. Captain Marvel

7. Aquaman

6. Wonder Woman

5. Ironman

4. Captain America

3. Batman

2. Spiderman

1. Superman!

By the way, that list didn't contain one of my favorite superheroes when I was a kid, although two of you did mention him on Facebook- Underdog! Remember him? "It's a bird." "It's a plane." "It's a frog!" "Not bird nor plane, nor even frog. It's just little old me, Underdog!" Superheroes are extremely popular and important to us. The highest grossing movie franchise of all time is the Marvel Cinematic Universe- movies which when combined have brought in over \$22 billion in 11 years. That's more than the Star Wars and Harry Potter movies combined! So, why are superheroes so important to us?

In this country they first became popular during a time of social chaos in the late 1920's as we dealt with the Great Depression, Prohibition, women's suffrage, a surge in racial tensions, and the leftover ravages of a world war, with another one on the horizon. People needed hope, and superheroes provided that. Lately there has been a resurgence in the popularity of superheroes during our own time of cultural confusion. Superheroes are models of what we want to be- courageous, powerful, and overcomers of evil and temptation. They are like us in some ways, only better! As author Joshua Chatraw puts it, "Hero stories provide deeply embedded living pictures that we strive to emulate." Heroes inspire us by their selfless decisions and actions on behalf of others.

On this All Saints Day, we remember that Christian faith has its heroes, too. The saints of old. People who are models of what we want to be. People who inspire us because they are like us, yet somehow better than us! In Hebrews 11, we find a listing of some of the Old Testament heroes. I'm not going to read the whole chapter, but I'll give you a flavor of it, and then we'll talk about the conclusion that the author draws about what all this has to do with us. ⁴*By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain's. Through this he received approval as righteous...* ⁵*By faith Enoch was taken so that he did not experience death; and "he was not found, because God had taken him"...* ⁷*By faith Noah, warned by God about events as yet unseen, respected the warning and built an ark to save his household; (Hebr. 11:4,5,7)*

The author starts all the way back in Genesis with Abel, Enoch, and Noah, who by faith, obeyed God, did the right thing even when it was very hard, and were used for God's purposes. The author then moves on to Abraham and Sarah, who left their homeland and journeyed to a new land that God promised them, and then waited decades for God to fulfil his promise to give them a son. Next comes Moses, hundreds of years later, who God used to deliver his people from Egyptian slavery against seemingly impossible odds.

He goes on to mention judges, prophets, and kings, who were faithful to God at the risk of their lives, all of whom God used to further his plans. And the author tellingly notes that many of them endured horrible deprivation and even torture for their trouble, and sadly, we read this in verse 39. ³⁹*Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised,* ⁴⁰*since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect. (Hebr. 11:39-40)* Huh? These heroes and heroines didn't receive what God promised, which was the promise of a new world where justice and peace will reign under the rule of the Messiah. Now, they may have received partial fulfillment of the promise, but not the whole thing, and yet God used them to move along his ultimate work and plan for the earth. And we can still learn from all of them and be inspired by them.

Which brings us to the grand conclusion of the passage: *Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us,* ²*looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.* ³*Consider him who endured such*

hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart. (Hebr. 12:1-3)

The image here is that of runners in a great race in a large arena, surrounded by a huge crowd cheering them on. We are those runners, and the crowd is composed of all those who went before us, saints great and small! There are great challenges and obstacles as we run this race- contentious elections and pandemics to name two, but also illness, doubt, marriage problems, work issues, climate change, and the challenges of aging. But we're not alone as we run. In fact, Jesus himself is the ultimate heroic example for us with his endurance and faith in God's final triumph over sin, death, and evil.

Jesus is the ultimate superhero in this passage! He certainly has superpowers- remember all those miracles he did! But an important part of his inspiration comes from the ways in which he was like us, fully human. He got hungry, tired, angry, frustrated, and sad. He worked, he grieved, he had family problems, and was subject to the injustices of the reigning powers and cultures. And yet, he lived with faith and courage, advancing God's work in the world in an incomparable way through his obedient death on the cross and resurrection from the dead. Now he enlists us to follow him, and continue God's work here on earth. So, how are you doing in running the race God has for you?

Remember: You're not alone in running that race. Think of those who have gone before you who have taught you and inspired you, and cheer for you now. Maybe they are national or international figures like Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., Billy Graham, or C.S. Lewis. Or, maybe they are people who God brought personally into your life. I think of Julian Penn, my sixth grade Sunday School teacher who was an accountant the rest of the week, but a hero to all us 6th grade boys in his Sunday School class. I think of youth group leaders, pastors, my parents and grandparents, friends, and church members. How about you? Who has helped shape your faith? Who is doing so now?

On this All Saints Day, let's take a moment of silent prayer to remember and thank God for those who have gone before you who have shaped your faith, who have taught or inspired you in your journey. And, notice those around you who are looking to you for truth and inspiration on their journeys- children, grandchildren, co-workers or neighbors. Look for opportunities to tell them your story as well as how you've been shaped by the biblical stories of real superheroes! Let's give thanks for the heroes in faith who have gone before us as we pray in silence.