

Have you noticed that superheroes seem to be multiplying. A quick internet search reveals superhero lists including one titled “My 100 Favorite Superheroes”.¹ The compiler starts with a few familiar to me: Superman, Spiderman and Batman but soon gets into comic book heroes who I have never heard of – Billy Batson, Cassandra Cain and many, many more. The Encyclopedia Britannica provides an alphabetical list but only includes 48, missing out on Billy Batson and Cassandra Cain and their colleagues. Apparently, it’s not entirely clear who is and who is not a superhero.

All superheroes have to have some kind of special power. Most superheroes can fly, many can make themselves invisible, or can shapeshift: they all have some degree of super-strength and superspeed. Again, there are useful lists of superpowers easily available, just a few clicks away.

This was not so in the days of 1st century Palestine.

Then there was only one superhero. The Messiah. There were no comic books or films about the Messiah but there were plenty of prophecies about him. He would for sure be descended from David the last king who ruled over a united country and who had a special relationship with God. He would save his people and rule over the nations. In the psalm we heard that event the trees will rejoice when he is revealed. And this superhero would rule not by using special powers and crushing his enemies but with righteousness and truth.

This was a big contrast with the Supervillains (by the way, there are lists of supervillains too) – the Supervillains of the day were Caesar and Herod. Caesar was considered to be the son of God and ruled the Roman Empire with a strong hand, using his powerful army to crush dissidents and insurgents across the Mediterranean and southern Europe. Herod was a vassal king – he got to rule over Israel but only by doing what

¹ <https://comicvine.gamespot.com/profile/lvenger/lists/my-100-favourite-superheroes/17520/>

Caesar wanted. Herod also killed people who got in his way, as we know from his decision to try to kill the baby Jesus which led to a lot of dead babies and grieving families. But I am jumping ahead of the story.

All the Jewish people were hoping that the superhero Messiah also known as the Christ would show up and take on the Supervillains, Caesar and Herod and would win! Then everyone would be free from oppression.

Today we are celebrating the backstory. The Messiah didn't start his public ministry until he was about thirty which was quite old because people then didn't live much beyond 35. Three of the gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke give us very similar pictures of Jesus the Christ's ministry of healing and teaching. Mark just has Jesus showing up as an adult, but Matthew and Luke give us the backstory – who his family was and how and where he was born.

And it's a bit of a surprise, unless you remember Superman who though he was actually from the planet Krypton was brought up by farmers in rural America, farmers who named him Clark Kent. Jesus the Christ was born to very ordinary parents, Joseph and Mary, who were away from home when he was born and who put him in a manger because they didn't have a crib.

And then heaven erupts in joy and excitement because the Messiah has been born as a human. God has become one of us. God now has flesh and blood and a new era has begun. Shepherds who were outdoors in the cold night watching their sheep caught the joy of heaven bursting out into creation, angels singing "Peace on Earth and Good will to humanity with whom God is pleased."

The Messiah is here. The Christ is born! Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

But wait! Remember that list of superpowers? I said earlier that based on some preliminary research it seems that most superheroes can fly, many

can make themselves invisible, or can shapeshift: they all have some degree of super-strength and superspeed. How can it be that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, the Prince of Peace when he shows none of those powers?

You may remember that Satan, who is the supervillain behind all Supervillains, offered Jesus special superpowers when he was fasting in the desert before starting his work, but Jesus didn't take them.

Is it possible that Jesus has other superpowers, superpowers that are not on the list?

I think so.

I think that Jesus the Christ had superpowers that he taught us and showed us. Powers of forgiveness, love and gentleness; the power of connecting deeply and intimately with the Superpower of the Universe who we call God and he called Father; the power of non-violent resistance to the arch-supervillain and all his ways.

And that is what calls us here tonight.

In the child in the manger we see qualities that will inform the earthly life of the Messiah; humility, quietness and living on the margins. God comes to earth in a stable. God comes to earth in the lives of common people.

And that is truly astonishing.

Jesus the Christ takes our idea of superheroes and stands it on its head.

The Messiah, the Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace is not going to use superspeed and super-strength to crush the villains. In fact, Caesar and Herod will laugh at him and send him for execution. No, the Messiah is going to change the world by the power of love and forgiveness.

The angels sang, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" On earth, peace among those whom he favors doesn't mean peace on a few who God likes. It means peace among all of us because God favors, God is pleased with humanity, God is pleased with creation. That's why God became part of the creation, one of us, that's why God came to dwell with us. To make one thing very clear. God loves us.

God loves you and me.

And because God loves us unconditionally, so God enables us also to love one another with understanding and forgiveness. Whenever we say the prayer that Jesus taught us together we say some form of "forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." This is the superpower of the Messiah, love and forgiveness. And it is ours too.

But there is one more thing...

The presence of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus the Christ gave us the gift of the Holy Spirit so that we might be in touch with God and God's grace in every moment. This is our hidden superpower – the presence of God, and it is that presence which enables us to do the difficult work of love and forgiveness. It is that presence that we find when we quiet ourselves and sing the carols of Christmas, and when we gather together for communion. God's presence is always here but we have to open ourselves to God, and let go of our preoccupations so that we can sink into the presence of that which is so much bigger than we are.

Let us take a few minutes now in silence to open our hearts and let that presence touch us, the Spirit of God, the spirit of Christmas filling us with forgiveness and God's astonishing love.