

## Look! Up in the Sky!

Join in when this starts sounding familiar. “Look! Up in the sky! It’s a bird! It’s a plane! It’s Superman!” Is there anyone here between the ages of oh, say, 60 and 40, who grew up in the U.S. and didn’t at some point in their childhood run around their backyard with a towel tied around their neck in the George Reeves flying pose? Here’s another one. It’s different from the first one, so be careful. “Look! Up in the sky! It’s a bird! It’s a plane! It’s a frog! A frog? Not bird nor plane nor even frog, just little old me, Underdog!” Ok, this one’s too short for you to join in, but let’s see if you can identify who said, or rather, sang this line: “Here I come to save the day!” That’s right, it was Mighty Mouse. For a good deal of the Twentieth Century, Americans seemed obsessed with the figure of a hero, humanoid, canine or rodent, who would swoop in from the heavens and set everything to rights. Now where, I wonder, did we come up with such a notion?

The first caped and flying superhero was, of course, that interplanetary defender of truth, justice and the American way, Superman, also known as Clark Kent or Kal-El, if you know about his infancy on the planet Krypton. The character was created in 1934 by a couple of nice Jewish boys from Cleveland, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster. The time was ripe for their creation. America, along with the rest of the world, was locked in the depths of the Great Depression. As is so often the case when people feel buffeted by events beyond their control, there was a hunger for entertainment that provided escape, fantastic visions of a better time. One of the most popular songs of the time was a hobo’s picture of paradise, “The Big Rock Candy Mountain.” For Siegel and Shuster, there were physical dangers to consider, as well as economic ones. The Jewish community in the U.S., unlike the majority of the populace, was well aware of what was happening to Jews in Europe. By the time of the creation of Superman, Hitler and the Nazis were firmly in control of Germany and anti-Jewish legislation had been passed and was beginning to be enforced. No death camps yet, but Jews were already barred from most professions in Germany and their businesses were boycotted. The Children of Israel, as so often in their history, were under attack.

And so, as has been well-documented in scores of articles and books, Siegel and Shuster created, unconsciously perhaps, the modern Jewish Apocalyptic Messiah, a good and righteous man who was beyond corruption by the forces of evil and who would battle them with super-human powers. He came from the heavens in a streak of fire – baby Kal-El arrived on Earth in a rocket ship that his adoptive parents, the Kents, first thought was a comet. The imagery is not unlike that found in the visions of the prophet Daniel, in which the Ancient of Days sits on a fiery throne and sends forth streams of fire and “one like a Son of Man” to conquer evil in the service of God. Siegel and Shuster’s hero did not kill his enemies, but bound them over for arrest by the police who would bring them to the court for judgment and then take them to a place of confinement where, in the American optimism of the time, they would be rehabilitated. Redeemed, you might even say.

There is a good deal of fantastic apocalyptic imagery in the Bible, especially in books like Daniel and the Revelation of John but also in smaller doses in books throughout the Old and New Testaments. Both of Paul’s letters to the church in Thessalonica contain similar imagery. The point of these sometimes bizarre passages is always the same: to remind the people of God who are facing difficult times that God and no one else is truly in charge, that suffering can be borne and that the ultimate fate of both the universe and of the individual is not in question – God is the

## Look! Up in the Sky!

one who saves. It may be hard for us today to hear that message of hope because the language of apocalyptic has been interpreted through the lens of violence by so many loud voices for so long. But I think if we look at passages like II Thessalonians 1 carefully, if we hear with ears of love and faith, as Paul commended, then we will discover the hope offered to us – not a fantasy hope of a man (or a mouse) in red and blue tights and a cape but rather the most deeply true hope in Creation – the hope embodied in the Son of Man, Jesus of Nazareth.

The danger of the apocalyptic literature of the Bible has always been that it will be taken literally. If the wild and amazing words of the prophets remind us of the uncanny power of God that will triumph over the power of the evils that oppress us, then all is well. But if we begin to focus on the destructive power which those words can also imply and decide to give ourselves to that rendition of the vision, then we begin to serve the evil rather than the good. On this Reformation Sunday, we remember the work of Martin Luther, who in his 95 Theses nailed to the door of the Wittenberg church called for the Church to reorient its vision from the accumulation of temporal wealth and power back to the service of God and God's people. This is well and good and we should take heart in the fact that we are spiritual heirs of Luther's reforming spirit. The tragedy, of course, is that the Reformation quickly became the cause of prolonged and bloody wars across Europe as representatives of the Church of Rome and the new Lutheran faith in turn lost sight of the compassion of Christ, branded each other as anti-Christ, and sought to become the literal reality of the angels of vengeance and fire which were never meant to exist in human form.

As soon as we decide that we have the only answer to the nature of God and the truth of God's will for Creation, we enter into that argument that grows louder and louder and louder. Unlike the creatures in Douglas Wood's tale of "Old Turtle," we often do not listen to the voice of reason crying "Stop!" Instead, we take it upon ourselves as individuals or group or nation to become the vengeance of God. Then we declare "Holy War" against our enemies, branding them as the "Axis of Evil" rather than listening to them and searching for the truth in their beliefs and complaints. We mount campaigns of "Shock and Awe," forgetting that it is God and God alone to whom awe is owed and we rain down fire upon them – explosives, incendiaries, napalm. Or, if we choose to become individual agents of the fire then we use incendiary language, name-calling, or bend the truth to fit our agendas. As soon as we decide that the end justifies the means, we step away from the grace and will of God and become that which we say we oppose.

Whenever I read passages like the apocalyptic middle section of our scripture for this morning, I always try to remember a couple of things. First, as I've already mentioned, the nature of apocalyptic literature and how it was meant to give hope to an oppressed people. The letters to the church in Thessalonica are among the earliest, perhaps the earliest, books of our New Testament. The people to whom Paul and Silvanus are writing have not yet experienced the kind of persecution that would come to Christians during the reign of Nero but many of them would have been Jews displaced from their homes by their expulsion from Rome under Claudius Caesar. They would have been subject to indictment as religious troublemakers and punished by beating and jailing, so they were suffering for their faith in a way that none of us have experienced. They could have used a little reminder of the power of God and of Christ, not unlike their forebears to whom the visions of Daniel were addressed. Like Americans in the

## Look! Up in the Sky!

Depression and perhaps like we who are experiencing the Great Recession, they needed a little Superman story, the exploits of a righteous hero to cheer them.

The other thing that always occurs to me when I read about the fire accompanying God is what that fire is used for. It's true that fire was the most destructive force known in Paul's world – there were no explosives, no TNT, not even any gunpowder – that had yet to arrive from China. But fire was also the most important constructive power known to humans. Fire was the only source of cooking and of providing light in the darkness. The prophet Malachi, whose book Paul would have known well, says that the Lord will come as a refiner's fire, purging from the lives of the people of God the impurities in their lives so that they will be revealed as the righteous ones God had always intended them to be. "The flame shall not hurt thee; I only design thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine." For those who have been suffering, Jesus brings hope of release, warmth, light and the casting off of all that separates from God.

There is, of course, in this passage language about the vengeance of God on those who do not know and obey God. Again, two thoughts: first, Paul in his later writings will be more specific about who it is that bears the enmity of God. "Our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh," he writes to the Ephesians, "but... against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." If we spend our time wondering which human beings will or won't fall under the power of God's wrath, we miss the point. Christ came not to condemn the world but that the world through him might be saved. Our task is to join with God in pushing back the powers of chaos as we love and serve our neighbors. As to those humans who have stood against the people of God and abused or persecuted them, well, the editors of the Revised Common Lectionary have provided us with a good counterpoint. In today's reading from the Gospel According to Luke there is the story of a Jewish man who was a collaborator with the evil of the Roman Empire. Not only did he collect taxes for the occupiers but he cheated his countrymen to enrich himself. Perhaps you remember him – his name was Zacchaeus. "Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.""

When I read II Thessalonians, I'm pretty confident that Paul knew his audience well enough to know that they would hear the word of hope in his apocalyptic imagery without getting caught up in vengeance fantasies against their persecutors. Listen again to what Paul had to say about his friends in Thessalonica: "We must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of everyone of you for one another is increasing. Therefore we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith during all your persecutions and the afflictions that you are enduring." He knew that even in the face of trouble, they kept the faith. He knew that even confronted with the enmity of their neighbors, they continued to become more and more loving. They would hear his message with the ears of faith and love and they would know that wherever faith and love are, surely there is hope as well.

As I mentioned, we do not face the same kinds of troubles faced by the Christians in Macedonia's capital city of Thessalonica. We are not subject to beatings or imprisonment for

## Look! Up in the Sky!

our faith, even if that faith calls us to open a freezing weather shelter without sprinklers! Times may be a little tough for some of us, it is true, but some of us have faced worse and all of us can rely on each other as well as on the power of God to get us through. As Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, we should see the times of reduced income or sickness or struggle or any kind of suffering as our opportunity to praise God and to focus on what is truly important in life – that God who created the world loves us and calls us to be the best people we can be with the most love for others and the greatest expectations for the future. The idol of material success, after all, has much less power over us when economic reality reveals the emptiness behind the lie that we can all live like kings with no consequences. Now we must resist succumbing to the fear of not having enough for surely God’s grace, all sufficient, will be our supply.

Paul and Silvanus (or Silas, as he is better known to us from Acts) write to the Thessalonians that they have been boasting about them among the churches of God because of their love and faith. I am glad to be able to report that I have been boasting about you while I was away. I had the opportunity to meet with a pastor from another church in our city during my vacation to persuade him to lead his flock into sharing their more fully-equipped building with the Cold Weather Shelter effort. He was mightily impressed with the evidence of how God has used this little congregation to minister to the homeless and the needy. I also spoke of you to the City Council of Lynnwood, both in their public meeting and to many of them privately, and told them of your resolve to help others. I believe that it was because of you all and the continued evidence of your response to God’s calling that most of those who were charged with honoring Caesar in the form of human law voted to give us the opportunity to first honor the imperatives of God in using our building to serve despite our non-compliance with city codes. I am as proud of you as Paul and Silas were of the faithful of Thessalonica.

I do not say this to you in order to make brownie points or so that you will go away from this place this morning feeling good about your own capabilities. Instead, I hope that you will remember how it is that you came by both the calling of God and the power to live into it. There is no one among us who wears a red cape. None of us are Superman or Underdog or Mighty Mouse. We are something better. We are the ones who belong to Jesus, the ones who live in Christ and in whom the Holy Spirit of God dwells. We are a faithful people, yes, a loving people, yes, a hopeful people, yes, but this is not by our own power. By the grace of God and not through any act or deed or worth of our own, we are granted the faith to say yes to the love of God and to the salvation of God. Suffering may come, indeed it is almost guaranteed to come, but suffering will not last forever. The powers of destruction will not have the last word. But if we remain steadfast, we will receive the promises of God. And, if we remain faithful and loving, we can continue to impact the world and bring glory to God.

And so, my brothers and sisters, know that “to this end we always pray for you, asking that our God will make you worthy of God’s call and will fulfill by power every good resolve and work of faith, so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.” Amen.