

“Superheroes or Saints”
Colossians 1:15-29
Rev. Dr. Ross Lockhart
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Thank you so much Emily for reading God's word for us and I have to work so hard at times in the church to not call people by their camp name. I almost invited Nimo to come forward to read scriptures so I'm so grateful that I was able to catch myself in time. First I want to say thank you for the privilege of spending time in scripture this week on your behalf while my life is full and meaningful at Saint Andrews Hall, and Vancouver school of theology and my teaching. I really really love preaching on a Sunday and so I get to kind of off the side of my desk throughout the week work on a message, and this scripture was such a joy to sit and to work with.

So, thank you for that privilege. And let's just begin with a word of prayer. Let's pray! Our God as we present ourselves to you in worship today we are mindful that the world is waking up around us, that activities are taking place that even here even now our minds may be drifting towards what is required of us later today or in the week to come.

But we ask that you might slow us down that you might continue to create a space here that in this time in place we might hear you speak, for your Holy Spirit is the true teacher. And so as we reflect on the power of Christ at work in our lives and the world around us. We pray that she would touch us, bless us, and encourage us to live lives worthy of the gospel in the days to come or you pray this in your name Father, Son and Holy Spirit. One God, now and forever, Amen!

Now, Warren was very kind I showed up this morning with a bunch of PowerPoint slides and gave him a stick and he said, no problem! I can fit that in. So, thank you to those on PowerPoint you can advance to the next slide. So super heroes or Saints is what I want to talk about today. Super heroes or Saints and thank you for those who called out your favourite superhero, I trust that everyone has one. We will go to the next slide.

Who are these people I asked excitedly as I walked down the aisle my eyes darting left and right trying to take in the scene. Oh! my friend replied casually pausing to rest his hand on a nearby Pew, those are the Saints. I stared back at him blankly. It was after school and we had stopped at his local Catholic Church to check in with his mum who is volunteering, I don't know at some function in the basement. As we move through the worship space I sensed charged silence as candlelight flickered and a distinct aroma of incense caused my nostrils to flare. The space was so familiar to my friend, but it felt utterly foreign to me as a visitor, given my low church Protestant upbringing.

I stood mesmerized by the colourful textured liturgical space and I asked naively of who are the Saints? Pointing towards a nearby statue of Saint Peter. My friend gave me an odd look you don't have Saints in your church? That's weird! Well, he stammered the Saints are like a superhero Christians. Superhero Saints.

Next slide. Well that seemed like utterly bizarre to me coming from a Reformed Christian background. This image of superhero Saints you see up on the screen kind of flashed to mind, Right! I mean I knew the superheroes, the real superheroes by heart reading their comic books and watching their movies religiously. Superheroes like Batman, and Spiderman and Wonder Woman did not look anything like those pious stone Saints before me in the Catholic Church. Saints as superheroes, no way!

Next slide. The superheroes I admired from comic books look at them, look at that screen. They were strong, they wore flashy outfits that I quite admired and had special powers that we as regular people did not possess.

I mean just look at Superman there Superman can fly, the Hulk had super strength you could smash things. Amazing! Doctor Strange could create forcefields and travel to other dimension's, awesome! I didn't see any of that in my church growing up or to be fair even in the Bible come to think of it. Now sure, hold on a second. The Bible had fun miracle stories that I learned in Sunday school and offered heroic examples such as

Moses or David or Esther, but superheroes like the flash Green Lantern or Captain Marvel, no way!

They appear to exist in a different universe than my stayed suburban Winnipeg upbringing provided. As my childhood cheerfully floated on the fumes of Christendom, it seemed impossible to reconcile the superheroes of popular culture with any kind of special status given to Christians that I might encounter, honestly! living or dead.

Next slide. Fast forward a few decades and these days in 2023 people in a more secular Canadian culture, Oh! they know all about the superheroes and not so much about the Saints. The explosion of marvel and DC comic movies over the last two decades has further intensified the idea of a superhero as one who has strength beyond us mere mortals, Right! Superheroes even if they appear to be like humans are often more like well Greek gods of old they stand apart from us in order to save us from whatever threatens to overrun our world. The idea that human beings committed to a humble life of service and care for their neighbour might be called a superhero, now seems absurd.

Next slide. The few Saints that the more secular world remembers today are often cast as solitary figures, detached from the church community, Right! And their stories of Christian witness have been shaped overtime to meet the marketing aims of our Western culture. If part of you wonders did Ross fall over and hit his head why is he preaching on this theme?

When I was selecting scripture and I was thinking of themes, I realized were kind of smack dab in the middle of the time of year where the broader more secular world pauses to recognize two Saints, Right! We are roughly a month on from who? St. Valentine and if you can't read that little print, it says, Hi! I'm St. Valentine I was brutally beaten and beheaded in the year 269 AD. I just wanted to thank you for remembering me on this day of romantic love, enjoy your dinner, Right!

And then, just this week in a few days it's what? St. Patrick's day, Right! And that's the ill-fated blind date between Saint Patrick and Medusa. It usually takes about 30 seconds for you to get it, OK, very good! He did drive the snakes out, OK, very good! You'll figure it out so there's this sense in which when we tell these stories in popular culture today even of Saints they've been morphed into individualistic heroic superheroes I find that fascinating.

Next slide! I find it especially fascinating when on your behalf I had the pleasure this week of moving around in between the Old Testament and the New Testament and trying to think, Ha! So what does the Bible actually say about Saints? Have you ever wondered that when we turn to God's word, we cannot escape the fact that the Bible repeatedly engages this theme of Saints. In the Old Testament, Saints are described as God's holy ones and in fact in some translations even in the New Testament it will talk about God's holy ones, God's chosen people rather than using the word Saint. I think it's because Protestants get a little twitchy with the word Saint. But God's holy ones, Psalm 16:3, or God's faithful ones, Psalm 145:10.

These are God's people who rejoice in God's goodness and trust in God's care, Second chronicles 64:1. When we turn to the New Testament the early church identifies all the Christians say in Jerusalem as Saints, Acts 9:13. and throughout Paul's ministry any baptized believer was called the Saint. II Corinthians 1, I Thessalonians 3, Philippians 1, and so forth.

Saints to be clear we're not perfect in scripture like some untouchable superhero, and in fact the Saints apparently needed help, Romans 8:27. But in turn let's note, not only did they need help they offered help to others, I Corinthians 16. Christian leadership in the Bible was all about what equipping the Saints for ministry, and encouraging every baptized believer to offer themselves to join God in sharing and showing the gospel in their character, in their action, in their speech. You can have a look at Ephesians 4 for that. And while Christians alive and at work in the world were referred to as Saints in the

Bible, as you read through scripture so to do we read that the Bible uses the language of Saints for those who have gone before us and are now in eternity with God as part of the communion of Saints, have a look at Hebrews 11 and 12 for that. For those of us alive in this world we are somehow connected the Bible claims with the communion of Saints through Jesus as we share in the inheritance of the Saints in light from our reading today Colossians 1:12 that's the passage that Emily reads so well for us.

Next slide! Paul sends this message to the church in Colossae, it's roughly around the year 60 AD. Paul is under house arrest in Rome, he's busy writing and firing off letters to all kinds of places not just to Colossae, that was located as I mentioned to the kids during the time at the front in Asia minor what we call Turkey today. But Paul is also writing letters encouraging Christians in places like Ephesus, Philippi, and all other kinds of places that he administered. He prays for the fledgling house church in Colossae and the portion of cautions one that we're looking at today begins with a hymn. If your Bible is actually still open that first section the reading is an early church hymn dedicated to Jesus. Imagine, here Paul is, it's like he's quoting lyrics to, I don't know! a hymn by Charles Wesley or a praise song by Chris Tomlin and it's right there in your Bible.

Next slide here at these are the lyrics to him that are ancient siblings in Christ would sing when they came together. Emily read it out in spoken word but our early Christian ancestors would have sung these words. Paul then reminds the Christians in Colosse, that they have been given a tremendous gift. They have been given knowledge of who God is that was previously unknown. Surprise! in such a full and clear way before God came to us in Jesus in the flesh people could not know God in such a profound and powerful way. It's a gift to know who God is through Jesus.

Next slide! Listen to what he writes I became a servant of the church according to the stewardship from God-given to me for you in order to complete the word of God that is the mystery that has been kept hidden from ages and generations, but what has now been revealed to his Saints. Commenting on this passage, the next slide! you have to

have at least one quote from John Calvin and every Presbyterian message let's just pause to admire how fabulous Calvin's beard was, thank you Calvin! He said this about the passage before us this language of mystery was confusing to people, so he said lest anyone should misinterpret the word mystery as though he was speaking of something still secret and unknown he has that it has now at length been published that it might be known to humankind what therefore was in its own nature secret has been revealed by the will of God thus there is no reason no reason why its obscurity should put us off now that God has revealed it. He adds, to the Saints for God's arm has not been revealed to all for them to understand his purpose.

So in other words, if you are in Christ a blessing is to know more of God than we could possibly ask or imagine. Next slide! Just think about that with me for a moment what a wonderful gift this is for us who love and follow the risen Lord Jesus and belong to the body of Christ we called the church. To know that we've been called by God and to know who God really is, revealed to us in Jesus and that knowing is our superpower, that's the superpower of the Saints. And that means that you are a Saint, and you are a Saint, and you are a Saint, and you are a Saint. We are all Saints, amazing!

Here's the other amazing thing. God apparently is making Saints all the time. Just this week I was meeting with church planters, and I heard the story of a young man on Vancouver Island. After a period of significant struggle had dramatic life transforming encounter with Jesus a man many of us in this room have similar stories and he joined the local Presbyterian Church God said go join a church and he stumbled into one of our Presbyterian churches, and there he's been received with grace and with love and has grown in his understanding of who God is. God knit this human being into the body of Christ and phoo! he's become a Saint.

It was as always encouraging to be reminded that God is active and seeking people out for relationship, making Saints and revealing the mystery of communion with God to those whom Christ calls like you and me. Next slide! As we reflect on today's biblical witness we can see how early church leaders like Paul understood Saints, not to be

superheroes in the way we understand them today, but rather the title applied to every baptized Christian as I've mentioned. Paul addresses his letters to the Saints in Corinth and emphasis and so forth it is kind of standard opening line, to the Saints! From a biblical perspective to be a Saint, it is not to stand out as an individual, but rather to stand up with other Christians in community, to worship God, father, son and Holy Spirit.

To live charitable lives of service with acts of mercy and grace directed towards others. It is also an let this be known in prophetic way the definition of a Saint, that challenges our cultures individualistic achievement orientated posture, that strives to pick winners and losers and elevate those who appear strong and without flaws like the superhero comic book, folks of our childhood in our very real world of business, politics, entertainment and so forth.

Next slide! This distinction between saint and superhero became clear to me this week when looking again at Sam Wells's excellent book. Sam Wells is the Vicar of St.Martins in the Fields church in London. If you've traveled to London, England it's a top tourist location and in his book 'Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics', he writes this that of the 64 references to the Saints in the New Testament everyone is in the plural just stop and think about that Saints are never alone.

He writes they assume demand require community, a special kind of community, the communion of Saints. And I love this, he writes, heroes super or otherwise have learned to depend on themselves Saints learn to depend on God and on the community of faith. This image that resists solitary Saints and instead finds the strength of an ordinary believers set within the body of Christ. I hope is an encouragement to us all.

Last slide! Recently I took my youngest child to see the latest marvel movie with superheroes 'Antman and Wasp'. Don't worry I'm not going to give a review of the movie. This time Antman and Wasp and up an alternative universe with their family and must save everyone in order to return home alive.Walking out of the movie theatre that day it dawned on me how all of these superhero movies in our culture they tend to end

the same way, right! After much struggle and conflict the good people persevere and they win.

I think the gospel has an even more compelling story of where this world is going what our church calls eschatological hope. That in the end God triumphs over evil creates a new heaven and a new earth where there is no more sorrow or suffering. The final word from God in scripture the very last sentence in your Bible, you can check it out is one of blessing to who? To the Saints.

Here it is the grace of the Lord Jesus be with the Saints Amen revelation 2221 what sets the Saints apart from superheroes is knowing that this victory is not accomplished through heroic individualistic effort, but rather through our baptism and belonging to the body of Christ we call the Church of which Jesus is the head. Gathered for worship, work and witness, ordinary members of christ's body like you and me celebrate the victory of Easter that changed everything through the one who gave his life on the cross that we may live forever with all the Saints.

In the name of the father, and of the son, of the Holy Spirit.

Amen!