

## **A Christmas Reflection on God's Appearance**

Based on Mark 6:45-56

I want to begin today by talking about superheroes. There is something fundamentally interesting and appealing about the idea of superheroes. Hollywood churns out superhero movies and people flock to see them. Even a bad superhero movie will make money.

What is it about superheroes that draw us in?

I think one reason is that a superhero embodies the virtues of our age. We like these stories because they are, at the end of the day, very simple good guy vs. bad guy kinds of stories. The superhero represents for us so many qualities that we think are virtuous: courage, skill, morality, and justice. The bad guy, on the other hand, is the opposite. Even when the movies try to make us sympathize with the villain, we tend to think they are deeply misguided which leads them to do bad things and embody all the wrong kinds of characteristics.

But what I think is the bigger draw to superheroes, a draw that gets down to the root of our psyche, is their power. We just like to see people do amazing things. And we like to see a bunch of powerful people in a contest with one another to see who is the most powerful. And we like that because we like to align ourselves with the superhero, and so we get to feel powerful by association. We work out our fantasies for power through superheroes and feel powerful through them.

I began talking about superheroes because a surface-level reading of the Gospels makes Jesus out to be kind of a superhero. Think of the story of Jesus walking on water. He sends the disciples out on a boat and then goes up a mountain to pray. He has a superhuman vision to be able to spot them several miles away, and then decides to walk across the lake, almost passing them by he was going so fast. When the disciples cry out because he looks like a ghost, he makes a not-so-subtle claim to be God, and when he gets in the boat the wind dies down. And then when they get to shore people swarm him again and he begins healing them left and right. He's kind of a superhero.

But I think that if we focus on just the amazing things he does here, then we miss the crux of the passage. On the surface it's all about how powerful Jesus is, and the way people get to feel powerful by being with him. If we look closely, however, this is not a

text about his power, but about his disciples inability to recognize it. For all the extraordinary things he does here, the disciples still seem to be a bit clueless—and I think that’s because he comes as a ghost, as an illusion or a specter. These are not conventional images of power in his day or in ours. Jesus is powerful, no doubt. But he does not seem to display that power in a way people truly recognize.

That brings us to Christmas. The Christmas story is, at its core, a story about what God’s power actually looks like. Imagine the shepherds tending their fields when the angels appeared and told them that God had come into the world, and that this star would lead them to him. What would they have imagined? Some glowing, powerful deity, no doubt. Maybe something that looked like a person, but who exuded authority and strength. And then the star lead them to a cave on the outskirts of Bethlehem. And then they went in that cave and saw a couple of refugees, one of them an unwed mother, and the Son of God himself lying in a manger, probably preparing for his next bowel movement. (That’s what babies do: eat, sleep, and poop. Why should the Son of God be any different?)

The God of the universe who is all powerful and infinite chooses to become manifest in the world as an infant. That is a problem for us folks who like superheroes. An infant can’t do anything for us, an infant can’t save the world from the bad guys. If anything, we have to do everything for the infant. God appears to us as a child, as a religious outsider, as a wonder-worker who does not seem to profit off his work the way a reasonable person would. God appears to us as a ghost, as an illusion, not as a superhero.

But Christ calls us to recognize our deep and extraordinary value in him, not by acting like a superhero, but by showing the power and strength of things like infants and ghosts and crucified criminals and plain ordinary human beings.

Christmas is a wonderful respite from the troubles of our world. For a couple of days over the holiday we can be with family and friends and enjoy these simple pleasures. But the Christmas story that we celebrate is one that reminds us that the glory of God is seen in a helpless infant. It is a story that tells us that hope for peace and goodness and love are not things that only the rich and powerful in our world get to enjoy. In fact these things are often far from those who choose to live that way. A Merry

Christmas, a true Christmas, is something that can only come to those who are weak, those who feel small and helpless, those who have no earthly power to speak of, because his power is made perfect in weakness. Christmas reminds us not only that God loves us and saves us, but that all of our struggles and fears, our feelings of weakness and insignificance, our hopelessness and emptiness, our powerlessness in this life will not overshadow the wonder and beauty and glory that God sees in each one of us. And with that in mind, I wish you all a Merry Christmas.