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Christmas in the Cathedral Meditation: The Humanity of God

Focus: And the Word became flesh and lived among us.—John 1:14

The cause of God is the cause of humanity, —Phineas D. Gurley, former pastor of First Presbyterian Church Dayton, Ohio, his funeral homily for Abraham Lincoln.

I direct my inquiries towards myself, to discover whether I am a twisted, arrogant monster like Typhon, or a kinder, simpler, creature sharing a divine and gentler nature.—Socrates in Plato's *Phaedrus*.

Every superhero has a superpower. Superman flies in the sky; Spiderman swoops through the canyons of Manhattan; WonderWoman swings the lasso of truth. Every superhero has a superpower.

Believe me, I know: I've done my time in the multiplex— with my son, when he was 12, 13, 14, 15 years old: three or four of his friends spread out in the seats beside us, tubs of popcorn and buckets of Mountain Dew precariously perched on their knees, my senses assaulted by the Surround-sound reverberating out of the walls and the 3-D images coming out of the screen right at me—I've done my time in the multiplex watching superheroes save the world—again and again and again. So believe me, I know: every superhero has a superpower.

Which raises a question, no disrespect intended: what was Jesus 'superpower?

He does some pretty amazing things: walks on water, brings the dead back to life, heals the sick, gives sight to the blind, multiplies the loaves and fishes, gets the better of Satan in a Scripture-quoting contest. Pretty amazing. But perhaps all of these are just the outer manifestations of a deeper power within, perhaps his true superpower is inside: courage, compassion, obedience, love, faith. You could even sum them all up in the phrase of the 19th-century theologian who spoke of Jesus' "unique God-consciousness."

And there's truth to all that. But it doesn't get to the heart of the matter, or to his heart, for that matter. No, to get to that, we have to say this: Jesus 'superpower is his humanity.

I know, I know: that seems like a disappointing, perhaps even ridiculous, answer. I mean, after all, humanity is something we all have, and often it seems more like a weakness than a power. When we say, "I'm only human," we mean something like, "I make mistakes; I don't know everything; I'm limited, mortal, subject to the whims of time and chance, susceptible to the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to. After all, we humans can be brought to our knees by something unimaginably minute—a virus, for example. We're only human.

So how can humanity possibly be a superpower?

Well, start here: Certainly, we are all human—biologically speaking. But that’s not the only, or the deepest, sense of our humanity. In this deeper sense, we biological humans too often fail to be human. Or as Mark Twain’s 13-year-old hero puts it: “Human beings can be awful cruel to one another . . . it’s enough to make a body ashamed of the human race.”

And it’s not just our cruelty—it’s also our folly, our venality, our vanity (I could go on). All of it enough, more than enough, to make a body—anybody—ashamed of the human race.

And so again and again and again, we’re tempted to reach for something more, something greater, something more than the human. We want to be like God: so we disavow our perceived human weaknesses by projecting them onto others, whom we then deem and demean as subhuman, thereby making them into our scapegoats.

Of course in doing so, we actually dehumanize not them, but ourselves. Like the villains in the superhero movies, we become inhuman, monstrous, threatening to destroy not only both them and ourselves, but also our entire world—all in the name of humanity, of course. The supervillain of all supervillains is Thanos, whose name means “death.”

And it’s not just in the movies. Art imitates life. Sadly, tragically, horrifically, our own history, and our own histories, provide more than enough evidence of our inhumanity. Human beings can be awful cruel to one another . . . it’s enough to make a body ashamed of the human race.

But not God. God is not ashamed of our humanity. No, God honors our humanity by becoming human: and the Word became flesh and lived among us, full of grace and truth.

He came into our world in the most ordinary human way: vulnerable, helpless, entirely dependent on the care of others. Tonight we’ve heard his human-origin story: they laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn..

And he grew up in the most ordinary human way: loved and loving; learning and playing; and, on at least one occasion, worrying his parents to death; all the while trying to come to grips with the great power he had been given and the great responsibility that came with it. Just like us. Jesus shows us the way to be human..

When Satan tested him, taunting him to show his superpowers, offering him all the power in the world in exchange, Jesus answered him:

“It is written, ‘Human beings do not live by bread alone.’”

‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”

And ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’

Jesus shows us the way to be human.

And from there, as Matthew tell us, “Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness. When He saw the crowds, He was moved with compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”

Jesus shows us the way to be human.

And when the religious and political authorities of his day—like the authorities of most any day—told him, in the name of God, to stop because he was upsetting the order of things, their preferred order of things—he would not stop, he would not let them take the name of God in vain; no; he would honor humanity by healing the sick and the broken and the lost even on the Sabbath because God honors humanity by healing us—the sick, the broken, and the lost through the Sabbath: “the Sabbath was made for human beings,” he said, “not human beings for the Sabbath.”

Jesus shows us the way to be human.

And when it came time for him to die, as he hung on the cross, as the passersby taunted: “Hey, hey you up there—if you are the son of God, why don’t you use your superpower and get yourself down? Save yourself!”—

he did not. For us and our salvation, he did not. He remained true—to his humanity and to ours.

Even when he cries, with his dying breath, that most human of all cries, “My God, my God why have forsaken me?” Even then, he remains true—true to his humanity and to God’s.

That cry itself is a prayer, a prayer to God; a prayer to God who knows, who feels, at that very moment, and in this very moment, all our human suffering, our whole world of pain; a prayer to God who hears, at that very moment and in this very moment, every cry; a prayer to God who counts, at that very moment and in this very moment, every tear in our world of tears, and promises to dry each one—

So that we might become what we truly are and were meant to be: fully human, that is, children of God: “And to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.”

“And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.” Thus, we have seen his humanity.

For us and our salvation, He saves the world: “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

His superpower is his humanity: God’s humanity; and through him, that humanity is ours, too.

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.