

“When the Heavens are Ripped Apart (Trinitarian Superpower)” based Mark 1:1-11, Acts 19:1-7

Delivered on January 10, 2021 at Absecon Presbyterian Church by Drew Mangione, pastor.

Recently, my son Harrison has been asking me over and over to read one book he got for Christmas. It is a Little Golden Book about the Comic book hero known as, “The Flash.” I know it’s been a while since most of you have seen Harrison in person, but my son is obsessed with having a superpower – namely Super Speed. He wants to be fast—No, he wants to be faster than anyone else. He runs well, but to be honest he runs more like a lurking linebacker with good lateral quickness, but he is not a sprinter. Still, he runs up and down the house as fast as he can, showing off his budding superpowers each night, to us, and anyone on video chat.

Last night, as I was reading this book to him for the 100<sup>th</sup> time at least, he said that he wished that he had superspeed, or that he had any superpowers at all. Of course, I reminded him that he already has a superpower – he has love. *‘No papa,’* he said. *‘I mean a real superpower. I know I have love.’* He’s five. I said, *‘Love is a real superpower. It’s the greatest superpower.’* *‘Well Papa, it’s not as good as superspeed,’* he said. I said, *‘But it is better. Love is God’s superpower, and unlike the Flash, God is real and so is love.’* I said to him, *‘God can do anything right?’* *‘Yeah,’* he said. *‘I know.’* *‘Well, everything God does, is done with Love.’*

Friends, that is the first thing I want you to take away from today’s message, that you, like my son and the One True God, have a superpower, and it’s called Love. *‘And immediately, going up from out of the water, he saw the heavens ripped apart, and the Spirit, as a dove, descending upon him.’* This is what Mark wrote for us. *‘And a voice came from out of the heavens, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved, in you I am well pleased.’*

It is in this moment, that we see the source of Jesus’s superpowers revealed for us, shown to us. Namely, in this moment, we see the fullness of the God at the edge of the River Jordan—the voice of the Father, the Word made flesh in the Son, and the Spirit as a dove, all there, in the place where John was baptizing for the forgiveness of sin. We see that Jesus is the beloved Son, declared by the Father’s voice, and the Spirit of God hovers over him and the waters, like today’s Psalm and in the Genesis account of creation, making order, of one God, yet a God in community of three, where the Father and Son love each other, in and through the Holy Spirit. And it is into this community, that we are called by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Friends, this is my third opportunity to bring you a message on the Baptism of our Lord, and each time I read this text, be it this version, Luke’s, or Matthew’s, or even John’s, I am always struck by this moment, because we get to read of God fully revealed – the Father, Son and Spirit in line, God fully revealed.

Now, before I lose you, I think it’s interesting that our kids can read about superheroes, and be enthralled by origin stories with words they don’t understand, like gamma rays and radioactivity, causing me as a father to spend so much time with my son, trying to explain in

words a 5-year-old can understand – what radioactive means, what radiation means, what gamma rays are – in a way that makes sense to him, and is still true to the science. He listens and is enthralled, asking me more and more questions.

Yet, we know that a reality in the church today is that adults are not as interested in the origin stories of God and God's power, as our kids are with superheroes. That as soon as a pastor says some buzzword like 'trinity,' 'creed,' or even 'theological,' people snore, tune out. Two thirds of their church, or at least lost their full attention, because one third assumes they already know all they need to know, and another third thinks they won't be able to understand it anyway.

But I expect better from all of you gathered here today, because you come back every week, and I am always going on about something like this, especially with Greek and Hebrew. Still, I call it out because with all that is going on in the world and church today, the truth of the Trinity is extremely important, and I want you to stay with me on it. We must not miss the vision of this truth in today's readings and how to apply it in our lives, because if we do, we may miss out on the superpower God has given to us, and we may fall powerless to the supervillains of this world who deceive us with false powers.

Friends, the Trinity, the Christian teaching that the One True God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is often very hard for us to wrap our heads around, yet it is the basis of our faith. It says that at the same time there is only One God, the same Lord, YHWH, Yahweh, of the Hebrew Scriptures. Yet this One God exists in three persons, all of which are the same God. What's more, each of these persons is distinct – a Father, a Son, and a Holy Spirit. Each one is the same God, but the Father is *not* the Son, the Son is *not* the Spirit, and the Spirit is *not* the Father. Still, each and all are the Lord, YHWH, the God of Israel.

There you have it. This is why I warned you because I knew I'd lose you. At home you've dropped your cereal bowl, if you're reading you are ready to put this down. Indeed, this is why the Trinity and other important foundational teachings are not preached, because most preachers expect to lose the audience when teaching this. Stay with me. Get some coffee if you need it. I want to bring you back and get your attention because I know this is hard to grasp. What matters is that we recognize how all of this affects us, and how we live. A famous philosopher who rejected the Trinity said he did so because, he thought it had no practical application to anyone's life. But he missed the key point that the Trinity has a superpower.

The idea of a God in three persons yet still one, shows us that the One True God, is a being that exists eternally in community. This is how we know that God desires relationship. A Triune God shows us that all of existence is held together by an eternal community of love, and the point is to know God and be known by this God to participate in this love. We are chosen to come into this community to share in its life. Being a community makes God's very essence grounded in self-giving love, rather than God as a solitary and lonely being creating things to have friends.

To practically apply the Trinity is to remember that this self-giving love of God in community is your command. Jesus, who is the Son, the Word of God, who is God, and shared fully in your humanity, he says that God's will is for you to love God with all your heart, soul, and strength, and to love your neighbor – every human, even your enemy – as yourself. To separate Jesus from God is to discount God's love for you, because if Jesus is only a human, then God's love was not great enough to share in your life, only enough to create a substitute.

Likewise, to separate Jesus from the Father and Spirit, as one of three equal gods, might make Jesus our natural favorite, since he then protects us from the Father. To reduce Jesus's equality, as something eternally subordinate to the Father, implies His love may be less loving, because he was just taking orders from the real authority in the Godhead. To make him a messenger, an angel, a created divinity, creates all of these same problems and more. Where then is the radical superpower of love if there is no Trinity? A separate or unequal Godhead, all weaken that God's power. They all diminish God's love.

And then in all this, we might forget the Holy Spirit altogether like in our passage from Acts, where they act like they had never heard of it. Or we might imagine the Spirit as a kind of force, like in Star Wars, connecting God to us and each other, as if this Spirit which raised Jesus from the dead and lives in us, is somehow less than God's own self. To do so, would tell us individually and as a church that, 'God is not with us.' Diminishing the Spirit denies our role as temples of God's presence.

Friends, the good news of God's love IS that God is with us. It is that by this Spirit, Jesus is with us to the end of the age, and this Holy Spirit, which is sent by the Father, pours the love of God into our hearts, it renews our minds, changes us, gives us God's superpower. It makes us holy, from the inside.

Friends, the true Faith is grounded in One God in three persons who from love has made us, and from self-giving love has torn open the heavens to be with us. Mark uses that language to open his gospel and uses the same language at the end when Jesus dies to mark the temple curtain separating the holy of holies from the people being torn in two. God calls us to be a community, just as God's own self is in eternal community, reflecting the love of a Triune God that longs to be in community with us. This God pursues us and this love demands our response.

So it is, that we are called to a three-fold response – confession, love, and witness. Confession is the telling of the truth about us and telling the truth about God. In Mark's reading we see that the people are going to John to confess their sin. What Mark reveals is that when the sinless Jesus is baptized, we see the truth about God, the very Trinity I just went over with you.

To respond to God's love with love is to return that superpower of love back to God in our worship, and in our love for God through the love we have for our neighbors, again even our enemies. Yes, even those we disagree with and those we may even think are Godless.

God's superpower is given to us to change us to be more like the God we serve. This change is seen in our third response, in our witness, which is seen not only in what we profess to believe with our words, but what we profess to believe by our actions, by our love.

Love is the superpower we all have access to by faith in Jesus, the Word of God made flesh, who though one in being with the Creator and through whom all things were created, entered into creation to be emptied and share fully in our human limits. Jesus was obedient to the divine plan and our human limitations, even to the point of death, even death on the empire's cross, only to rise again as the firstborn of the new creation, the One through whom all things will be reconciled to himself.

It is by this life, death, and resurrection of the Son that the Father's love is fully revealed to us, and through which we are made to be temples for God's Holy Spirit, which is the source of God's love from within. This love makes us a community of believers, a church charged with reflecting this love in word and deed, following every command, and making disciples of every nation, baptizing in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Friends, I know that the last 10 months of this pandemic have been difficult for all of us. I confess to you that I am tired, exhausted, and frustrated. It's the truth. You probably are too. I know that 372,500 loved ones are lost to this virus, including more and more loved ones you know or are close to you. I know many of you have battled, are battling, or have loved ones fighting the virus right now, struggling perhaps with symptoms of pneumonia.

Friends, I know also that many of you and even I have grown tired of the change in our world. I'm 42 years old and the last 25 or 30 years has so drastically changed our world. We struggle with 25 plus years of technological, political, and cultural changes, much of which has come to a head in the division we see in this nation. And we all want to know what we can do, what power do we have?

Friends, in the Triune God we have the superpower of love, of self-giving love. This self-giving love is a love that can change the world, a love that can reconcile the world to God our Father. It is the love we see on the cross in Jesus our King, a king who did not raise up an army, but died for us. It is the love that is poured in our hearts by the Holy Spirit that longs to dwell inside the believers and the community.

If we are to respond to our God by confession, by love and by witness, then we must reject their opposites – lies, division and self-interest. We must live as if we believe that God is in fact with us, that God does in fact love us, and we are in fact called to reflect God's love in this world.

I understand that there is anger in this world, but anger only spreads lies, it spreads division, and it spreads self-interest. As a church, our primary concern for correction in this world must start with us. Too often it feels like church leaders are focused on yelling at all the people who

do not yet know the love of God, but in doing this they only reflect the ways of this world, not God. In 2 Corinthians, the Apostle Paul warns not to judge the outside world, but to be vigilant in correcting error within the church.

Friends, there is great error within the church, and it starts with a failure to confess the truth. There are those who drag our God into American partisan political disputes. I am troubled that it was called a 'Jericho March' in Washington D.C. that led to these riots. They were acting as the world acts, professing that to know and love God is to have one political persuasion. And I am troubled also, that the response by other church leaders has been to condemn and ridicule those who were there, again reflecting this world.

The problem, I think, really does have a lot to do with the Trinity and a rejection or lack of understanding about the faith of the church catholic from when Jesus rose to today in its many different traditions and forms. What unites us is the doctrine of the Trinity, the Creed we will profess in a few minutes. But the false doctrines that get peddled out there as Christian that reject the truth and the historic faith of the church.

Some of these reduce Jesus just to some great teacher. They say it doesn't matter who he was, only his teachings matter, but then selectively choose which teachings really matter. There are some who reduce Jesus to an eternally subordinate Son with an authoritarian Father that he satiates by his death. Then there is the weird claim that his power for us was not his love, but a word of faith, and somehow speaking the right and magical intonations of prayer to wrestle from God whatever we want for ourselves in this world. These are heresies in our church today that divide us. They lie about who God is and they promote the individual – ranking individual thoughts over the community God calls us to be. I ask you to please be wary of this. Please!

We spend an hour in this service each week, and how many more countless hours on social media, reading news, and perhaps even getting bombarded by the false teachers who have such a presence on television and the Internet. One hour is not enough to defend ourselves and give the church the life that God calls us to have.

I call on you to know the church's historic faith that I professed today, to read your bibles beyond Sunday morning. I ask you to meditate on the God expressed in the Creed we will recite after our hymn. Even if it is hard to understand with terms that are too much, keep this Creed close to you, and use it with your reading of scripture, as it frames how the church has read the bible. Seek your superpower, not in the dominance and power of this world, but in self-giving love, the love of God to be in community with each other, to confess the truth of who God is and the truth of God's love. We do this while we confess our own sins first without excuses, to be changed by love, and to be witnesses to our God in a very broken world. Amen.

# Word Search Puzzle

from WhenWeWordSearch.com (use for free distribution only)  
words in a straight line left to right or top to bottom



Words in the puzzle are printed in ***bold italic***.

Mark 1:1-11 (Pastor's Translation) The beginning of the ***good*** news of Jesus the ***Messiah***, Son of ***God***. As it has been ***written*** in the ***prophet Isaiah***: "Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will ***prepare*** your way. The voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way of the ***Lord***. ***Make straight*** his paths.'" ***John*** came baptizing in the wilderness, proclaiming a ***baptism*** of repentance for ***forgiveness*** of sins. All the ***region*** of Judea and of ***Jerusalem*** were going out to him, and all were being baptized by him in the ***Jordan river***, confessing their sins. And John was clothed in the ***hair*** of a camel, and a ***belt*** of ***leather*** around his ***waist***, and he is ***eating*** locusts and ***wild honey***, and he was preaching, saying, "He who comes after me is mightier than me. I am not ***fit*** to be ***stooping*** down to untie the ***strap*** of his sandals. I baptized you with water, but He will ***baptize*** you with the ***Holy Spirit***." And it came to ***pass*** in those days that ***Jesus of Nazareth, Galilee*** came and was baptized in the Jordan by John. And immediately, going up from out of the ***water***, he saw the heavens ripped apart, and the ***Spirit***, as a dove, ***descending*** upon him. And a ***voice*** came from out of the heavens, 'You are my ***Son***, the ***beloved***, in you I am well ***pleased***."