

At the Movies: 3. Hiding in Plain Sight (Black Panther)

John 1:1-5, 14, 38-39

July 21, 2019

Pastor Steve Richards

Today, we consider the superhero movie, Black Panther, which was released in 2018 and quickly became one of the highest grossing movies of all time. As I said I would, I want to ask you which superhero that you think stands above all the rest. Take five seconds, turn to the person on your right and on your left, and share your favorite superhero. (pause) It sounds like you had a superhero in mind. I'm not going to ask you who you chose, because on this I don't really care what you think because the best and only one worth considering is Superman. He's faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, able to leap tall buildings with a single bound. He can change the course of rivers, bend steel with his bare hands, and he fights a never-ending battle for truth, justice, and the American way. That's a superhero! As a child, I had his comic books, I saw all of the movies - the original movies from the 1950s, and the ones from the 1970-80s. He was my hero.

We all are drawn to superheroes. We dressed up like them, proudly carried lunchboxes with their faces, and debated who would win if pitted against each other. Superman, of course! Since 9/11, there have been more superhero movies made than any other movie genre. There's been superman, batman, the avengers, iron man – three times, incredible hulk, ant man, aqua man, spiderman, wonderwoman and more. Psychologists tell us that superheroes help us cope with adversity in our own lives when we see that even superheroes struggle with problems and somehow prevail. They have a sense of justice. They also do the right thing – at least most of the time. We have a longing for superheroes which brings us to Black Panther.

Black Panther first came to life at a critical moment in our nation's history, first appearing during the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s when he was written into episode 52 of the Fantastic Four. It was at a time when our nation struggled with racial stereotypes – and after the news of the past week, it's clear we still struggle. Here's how Black Panther was introduced in 1966. (page from the comic book) The Fantastic Four are riding around in a futuristic spacecraft. When asked where the spacecraft came from, one of them replies: *"It was an unexpected gift sent to me by an African chieftain, named Black Panther."* And another says, *"Never heard of him. But how does some refugee from a Tarzan movie lay his hands on this kinda gizmo?"* As if someone from Africa was not smarter enough or resourceful enough to invent it! How wrong is that? Do you hear the stereotype, the discriminatory thought? People looked to Africa and saw a continent where nothing good could come. Fast forward 52 years and now Black Panther emerges as someone who shatters such stereotypes. Listen to the way he is introduced in the movie. [movie clip]

T'Challa is anything but the racist stereotypes. He is a warrior king with genius intellect. He rules with generosity and humility, peace and patience. Wakanda is located in the heart of Africa as the most technologically advanced culture on earth. They have harnessed technology to create a way of life that the rest of the world has never even imagined. Early in the movie, T'Challa learns that his father has died and so he returns to Wakanda to be crowned as the next king. In this scene, we are given a picture of Wakanda. Take a look. [movie clip]

Wakanda is beautiful, and yet hidden in plain sight. It is disguised as a third world country so the world cannot see its technological advances and attempt to take it away. Wakanda is a picture of possibilities of what the world could be. Black Panther may be king, but the true power of Wakanda resides in these three women. In Wakanda, women hold all of the leadership roles.

They govern the military and the science and technology. As we get acquainted with Wakanda, we see a wonderland of possibilities when racism and discrimination do not exist. We all need this kind of vision – especially now. We need a vision where our diversity is our strength, a vision that could build up and carry us forward. What is your vision of Wakanda?

My office is only a few feet from Bloom, our child care center. Several times every day, I am walking through the center, and this week I've wondered if what I see there might be the beginning of a new kind of vision. Currently, there are 67 children in this program. The children are Asian, Hispanic, black, middle eastern, eastern European, and white. 54% are children of color, and what we've learned is that many of the families with white children have chosen Bloom because of its diversity. What will happen when the youngest children of our community grow up forming relationships with each other that are multi-racial, multi-cultural. The children are seeing what's hidden in plain sight when we don't see stereotypes first. Last week, I spoke with a parent who told me that he had never even spoken to a person of color until their family found Bloom. It is one of the things this church is continually doing – looking for ways in which we can interact and form relationships among the rich diversity that this world has to offer.

Black Panther is the superhero with superpowers as a result of a heart-shaped herb, but it is his body suit – his wearable technology that gives him abilities no one else has. He is able to absorb every hit that he takes in a way that only makes him stronger. He is the picture of nonviolent resistance. He lives by turning the other cheek. By absorbing the opposition, he becomes a better king. We all need this – the ability to absorb the pain of the world and become something better, more faithful, more generous. He represents hope and possibility and strength – and he's hidden in plain sight.

This morning, we heard the opening words from John's gospel where he describes who Jesus was and why he came into the world. The God of the universe longs to relate to us and to love us, so God becomes flesh, God becomes like us so we can see ourselves in him and begin to experience a world, a kingdom of hope and possibilities, a kingdom of justice and love. This is the story that we celebrate every Christmas. **In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. The Word was with God in the beginning. Everything came into being through the Word, and without the Word nothing came into being. What came into being through the Word was life, and the life was the light for all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness doesn't extinguish the light. The Word became flesh and made his home among us. We have seen his glory, glory like that of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.** Jesus enter the world as a bundle of human vulnerability, a baby wrapped in a blanket, which is how every one of us enters the world. And as Jesus grows he experiences what we do. He does not stand apart and watch, but he experiences all the struggles and joys of living. At the age of 12, he goes on a trip with his parents to the big city and he gets lost. As he grows into adulthood, he decided to do what his Dad did, becoming a carpenter in a tiny, nearly forgotten village. And then as he lives into the calling that God placed on his life, he doesn't use his power to be superior to others. Instead he seeks out the hurting, serves the poor, tends to the sick, finds the outcasts and eats with them. He absorbs the pain of the world. Because the God of the universe has become flesh to be with us, so everyone might see in him the power and presence of God and be changed by it.

John goes on to describe how Jesus is baptized and anointed as God's own. And then, in the next scene, Jesus is walking and two guys see him and decide to follow him. Something was different about this man, and when Jesus realizes he is being followed, he says **"What are you looking for?" They said, "Rabbi, where are you staying?" He replied, "Come and see."** And they do, and what Andrew sees changes his life. He goes to his brother, Simon and says,

You've got to come and see this guy. And what Simon sees is so compelling that he invites Philip, and what Philip sees changes his life. He invites his friend, Nathaniel, "Come and see." What did they see? They each saw something that touched the deepest longing of their heart. The Word became flesh to meet us wherever we are in ways that will help us see what we really need.

Jesus wants us to see in him and also to be like him. Here's what he tells his followers: **You are the light of the world. A city on top of a hill can't be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a basket. Instead, they put it on top of a lampstand, and it shines on all who are in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before people, so they can see the good things you do and praise your Father who is in heaven.** (Matthew 5:14-16) Our electricity went out during Monday evening's storm, and it didn't come back on until Tuesday about noon. Monday night, we had a house filled with lights and not one of them could do what they were designed to do because there was no electricity, no power. God sent a power source into this world and when we tap into that power source, we become the light that God designed us to be and that this world needs. Jesus is saying, don't be hidden in plain sight, but stand out – shine. Be the hope that this world needs so that everyone can see God's power and presence in a way they can understand.

The movie moves to a closing scene about how we can experience Wakanda, not only in one time and place but everywhere. Black Panther takes his sister on a trip to California, and what we see is the Black Panther's strategy to bring Wakanda everywhere. *[movie clip: Black Panthers strategy is to go to places of need and using their resources, help others]* Giving away what has been given in a way that will empower and bring hope to others. Who are the people who have poured into your life? Whose life are you pouring into? Who could you encourage this week? When we tap into the power and presence of Jesus, we have the potential to be a light – and that's what it means to be real superhero in this world.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of July 21, 2019

Weekly Prayer: Gracious God, we are students in search of a Teacher, disciples longing for the Master, sinners redeemed by the Savior, Christians following the Christ. May the words of our mouths, the meditation of our hearts, and works of our hands be acceptable to you this day, O God, our Strength and Redeemer. Amen.

Monday, July 22

Scripture: 2 Peter 3:17-18

Therefore, dear friends, since you have been warned in advance, be on guard so that you aren't led off course into the error of sinful people, and lose your own safe position. Instead, grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and savior Jesus Christ. To him belongs glory now and forever. Amen.

Observation: Early in Black Panther, new king T'Challa's brilliant half-sister Shuri tells him she wants to show him how she's improved the Black Panther suit. He tries to brush her off, saying his suit works fine. Shuri insists: "Just because something works doesn't mean it can't be improved." The apostle Peter wrote something similar about our spiritual life. Grace "works" – but that means it provides a climate of love in which we keep growing, not an excuse for indifference about areas where we need to grow.

Application: “Growing in grace” is not just intellectual. It is impossible to stand still as a Christian. Our human tendency is to push Jesus Christ to the back of our minds. The remedy is to make deliberate, constant and frequent efforts to bring him to the front. We need to know more about him, but we also grow in knowledge by trusting in his teaching and living as his follower. In what ways are you growing by trusting and living as his follower?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, give me the gift of honesty with myself, so that I can recognize where I need to change. Show me the places where you call me to grow in your amazing grace. Amen.

Tuesday, July 23

Scripture: James 1:13-18; Romans 12:1-2

No one who is tested should say, "God is tempting me!" This is because God is not tempted by any form of evil, nor does he tempt anyone. Everyone is tempted by their own cravings; they are lured away and enticed by them. Once those cravings conceive, they give birth to sin; and when sin grows up, it gives birth to death. Don't be misled, my dear brothers and sisters. Every good gift, every perfect gift, comes from above. These gifts come down from the Father, the creator of the heavenly lights, in whose character there is no change at all. He chose to give us birth by his true word, and here is the result: we are like the first crop from the harvest of everything he created.

So, brothers and sisters, because of God's mercies, I encourage you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice that is holy and pleasing to God. This is your appropriate priestly service. Don't be conformed to the patterns of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds so that you can figure out what God's will is—what is good and pleasing and mature.

Observation: As king, T'Challa learned that the father he had idolized had, in fact, made some serious mistakes. His girlfriend told him, “You can't let your father's mistakes define who you are. You get to decide what kind of king you are going to be.” Some Christians assume God sent the problems you face, so you can't do anything about them. But that is not the Bible's teaching. Jesus' half-brother James wrote that our God gives good and perfect gifts, not traumas or temptations. God calls us to “be transformed,” to take responsibility for the kind of people we become.

Application: Sooner or later, as we let God transform us we become agents of transformation. In our homes, schools, neighborhoods or workplaces, we start to notice things that aren't quite as God wants them. What steps, large or small, have you taken to transform attitudes or practices in your settings? Where might you have the chance now to transform things for the better?

Prayer: Loving God, sometimes I want the credit for doing good, but I want to blame you for anything in me that's wrong. Fix in my heart and mind the conviction that it is life's good and perfect gifts that come from you. Thank you. Amen.

Wednesday, July 24

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

I received a tradition from the Lord, which I also handed on to you: on the night on which he was betrayed, the Lord Jesus took bread. After giving thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this to remember me." He did the same thing with the cup, after they had eaten, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Every time you drink it, do this to

remember me." Every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you broadcast the death of the Lord until he comes.

Observation: Paul reminded his readers that Holy Communion was a tradition, and a gift they received and now had a responsibility to guard. Jesus chose to memorialize this most painful part of his story. He wanted us to remember not only the resurrection, but also the sacrifice before the resurrection. Practicing Communion is a way of facing the full, complex story of Jesus. Paul said to his readers: do not ignore the painful parts. Confront the full history.

Application: In Black Panther, a British museum director asked Killmonger to step away from a 7th-century Beninese hammer display, saying, "These items aren't for sale." Killmonger responded, "How do you think your ancestors got these? Did they pay a fair price, or did they take them, like they took everything else?" He asked the museum director to confront the displayed objects' full history. Have you ever wanted to forget a painful part of your history? Have you been avoiding parts of your past to create a more idealized self? How could confronting your past give you more authenticity?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you for your sacrifice. Give me the courage it takes to confront my painful histories. Be with me as I work to heal and reconcile. Call me to authenticity and vulnerability. Amen.

Thursday, July 25

Scripture: Isaiah 1:13-17; Matthew 5:38-48

Stop bringing worthless offerings. Your incense repulses me. New moon, sabbath, and the calling of an assembly— I can't stand wickedness with celebration! I hate your new moons and your festivals. They've become a burden that I'm tired of bearing. When you extend your hands, I'll hide my eyes from you. Even when you pray for a long time, I won't listen. Your hands are stained with blood. Wash! Be clean! Remove your ugly deeds from my sight. Put an end to such evil; learn to do good. Seek justice: help the oppressed; defend the orphan; plead for the widow.

"You have heard that it was said, An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I say to you that you must not oppose those who want to hurt you. If people slap you on your right cheek, you must turn the left cheek to them as well. When they wish to haul you to court and take your shirt, let them have your coat too. When they force you to go one mile, go with them two. Give to those who ask, and don't refuse those who wish to borrow from you.

"You have heard that it was said, You must love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who harass you so that you will be acting as children of your Father who is in heaven. He makes the sun rise on both the evil and the good and sends rain on both the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love only those who love you, what reward do you have? Don't even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing? Don't even the Gentiles do the same?

Therefore, just as your heavenly Father is complete in showing love to everyone, so also you must be complete.

Observation: Angry because T'Challa's father abandoned him, Killmonger seized the throne of Wakanda, and tried to make it a war-like, destructive kingdom. T'Challa said to his father's memory, "All of you were wrong.... No more.... He's a monster of our own making. I must take back the mantle. I must right this wrong." God's people, too, have had to honestly face corporate as well as personal wrongs, and change course. That's often scary, difficult—and vital.

Application: Isaiah said on God's behalf, "Stop bringing worthless offerings" (1:13). Read again the rest of the passage, and ponder what made their offerings "worthless." With identity theft and Internet scams, we know technology can make doing wrong more efficient. Are there ways technology can also empower those who seek justice? What can you do in the United States in 2019 to "help the oppressed; defend the orphan; plead for the widow"?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you taught and lived a gracious, generous life. I want to keep learning to love all people as you loved them, regardless of gender, race, religion, ideology or even behavior. Amen.

Friday, July 26

Scripture: Romans 9:24-26; Ephesians 2:14-16

We are the ones God has called. We don't come only from the Jews but we also come from the Gentiles. As it says also in Hosea, I will call "my people" those who aren't my people, and the one who isn't well loved, I will call "loved one." And in the place where it was said to them, "You aren't my people," there they will be called "the living God's children."

Christ is our peace. He made both Jews and Gentiles into one group. With his body, he broke down the barrier of hatred that divided us. He canceled the detailed rules of the Law so that he could create one new person out of the two groups, making peace. He reconciled them both as one body to God by the cross, which ended the hostility to God.

Observation: At the end of Black Panther, T'Challa vowed eloquently that Wakanda would no longer isolate itself from the world and its problems. "In times of crisis," he said, "the wise build bridges, while the foolish build barriers. We must find a way to look after one another as if we were one single tribe." In Paul's world, there were barriers between Gentiles and Jews. Paul had lived out that bias (Galatians 1:13-14). There was a real wall in the Temple in Jerusalem in which Gentiles were excluded from the court of Israel (for Jewish men) and even the less pure court of women (for Jewish women).

Application: All major world faiths (including ours) attract some people who nurture a sense of hatred and grievance, and call for violence against those of other faiths. How can you differentiate those in any faith who seek to build walls from those who wish to tear down walls and create more goodwill, peace and cooperation? What attitudes and actions show that you belong to the "one body" (Ephesians 2:16) Jesus came to create?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you showed us a better way—you reached out to people who snubbed you, and asked God to forgive the soldiers who crucified you. Help me to live into the power of your love. Amen.

Saturday, July 27

Scripture: Hebrews 2:14-15; Revelation 5:6-12, 19:16

Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, he also shared the same things in the same way. He did this to destroy the one who holds the power over death—the devil—by dying. He set free those who were held in slavery their entire lives by their fear of death.

Then, in between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders, I saw a Lamb, standing as if it had been slain. It had seven horns and seven eyes, which are God's seven

spirits, sent out into the whole earth. He came forward and took the scroll from the right hand of the one seated on the throne. When he took the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each held a harp and gold bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. They took up a new song, saying, "You are worthy to take the scroll and open its seals, because you were slain, and by your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe, language, people, and nation. You made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they will rule on earth." Then I looked, and I heard the sound of many angels surrounding the throne, the living creatures, and the elders. They numbered in the millions—thousands upon thousands. They said in a loud voice, "Worthy is the slaughtered Lamb to receive power, wealth, wisdom, and might, and honor, glory, and blessing."

He has a name written on his robe and on his thigh: King of kings and Lord of lords.

Observation: In *Black Panther*, Killmonger seemed to kill T'Challa for the throne. T'Challa barely survived, then revived. He returned to dramatically confront Killmonger, saying, "I never yielded! And as you can see, I am not dead!" Jesus' followers had an even more dramatic witness. Jesus was dead and buried – and then came to them, saying, "I am not dead!" In Revelation's symbolic vision, the "Lion of the tribe of Judah" was also "a Lamb, standing as if it had been slain." The hosts of heaven sang, "Worthy is the slaughtered Lamb." Revelation 1:5 called Jesus "the firstborn from among the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth" (that's what "King of kings" meant). That's why the earliest Christians faced down the cruelest deaths the Roman Empire could devise for them. That's why we, like those first Christians, can trust that no matter what life brings, we are on the side of the Lion/Lamb, finally prevailing through self-giving love.

Application: Many people believe that because the world is founded on violence, it can be saved only through violence. Christians, however, have a different story – one that claims the world is founded on peace and can be saved from its violence only by peace. Jesus' victory over evil, hatred and death at Easter is our defining story. In what ways does the story of Jesus define your life? What assumptions about life have you needed to rethink in the light of Jesus' story?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you died for me, for all of us—but you are not dead! Teach me day by day how to live in your triumphant, self-giving, ennobling love. Amen.