

'The Avengers' Mirrors Christian Elements of Redemption

In the 1970s, the people of the United States went into a grand funk of stupendous proportions.

Hollywood and the news media kept telling us that the government was thoroughly corrupt, that society's religious and cultural traditions were simple-minded and destructive, and that we were on the wrong side of the war against the evil communist tyrannies of North Vietnam, China and the Soviet Union.

Then, in 1976 and 1977, something extraordinary happened.

Two men, Sylvester Stallone and George Lucas, released two movies about underdog heroes who battle incredible odds: *Rocky* and a "little" \$11 million movie called *Star Wars*.

Hollywood hasn't been the same since.

Rocky and *Star Wars* showed the Hollywood establishment that people love heartwarming, heroic stories about courage and righteousness overcoming fear and evil.

In heroic stories, the hero encounters numerous obstacles and tribulations that test his character, courage, stamina, strength, intelligence and inner resolve or will. In doing so, such stories provide meaning and purpose to our own lives. They bring us laughter, tears and joy. They stimulate our minds and stir our imaginations. They help us escape from our daily lives for a while and visit different times, places and people.

They can also arouse our compassion and empathy, or spur us toward truth and love. Finally, they also can give us an

insight into transcendental, eternal truths and values, or embody the ideals or values of our own culture and society by giving expression to deep, commonly felt emotions and thought.

We identify with such heroes as Rocky Balboa or Luke Skywalker, or Frodo and Sam in *The Lord of the Rings*, or Beauty in *Beauty and the Beast*, because we recognize that we too are on our own momentous journey or quest. Thus, how a hero's journey informs and illuminates our own journey becomes a significant touchstone in our own lives.

In recent years, the popular culture's focus on heroes has led to a huge interest in bringing the renowned superheroes of the comic-book world to the big screen. Part of this interest has been fueled by giant technical leaps in the ability of computer-generated images to create detailed, fantastical images, including jaw-dropping action scenes.

This Friday, Disney released another huge superhero movie. *The Avengers* is one of the most entertaining and uplifting superhero movies yet from Hollywood. It's sure to be a huge box-office hit.

At the end of the story in *The Avengers*, the group of heroes is ready to sacrifice their lives to stop the evil force threatening Earth, which is led by the demonic figure from Norse mythology, Loki. In fact, during the climactic battle, one of the heroes will have to risk his own life in order to save everyone else.

This notion of sacrifice has become a frequent theme in many recent superhero stories, from *Spider-Man 2* to *Captain America* and *The Green Lantern*. In fact, one might say that sacrifice is in the very DNA of nearly all stories about superheroes and heroes.

Actually, it's such a central motif that one of the people Movieguide helped inspire with our work, film scholar Dr. Stan Williams, wrote that in many stories, not just stories with

heroes in them, sacrifice is a key theme in Act 2 and 3 of many stories, including movies like *The Avengers*.

As such, the theme of sacrifice is part of a narrative structure that reflects the “greatest story ever told”—the story of Jesus Christ’s birth, teaching, suffering, sacrifice, death and resurrection. The whole structure may be outlined as follows:

Promise, Birth, Suffering, Sacrifice and Resurrection/Redemption.

This pattern is reflected in many, if not most, hero stories. Thus, it can be found in both *Star Wars* and *The Avengers*.

For example, the story of Luke Skywalker in *Star Wars* is one of Promise (the promise of the “one” who will bring “balance” to the Force), Birth (the birth pangs of Luke’s long journey toward becoming a Jedi Knight), Suffering (all the trials and tribulations Luke undergoes throughout his story), Sacrifice (Luke offers himself to the Emperor and nearly dies), and Resurrection/Redemption (Luke’s intent to sacrifice himself is designed to resurrect and redeem the soul of his own father, Anakin, who has become Darth Vader).

In the same way, the journey of the superheroes in *The Avengers* is first one of only Promise. Thus, at the movie’s beginning, the team of superheroes is only a Promise, yet to be fulfilled. Their journey is also one of Birth (the birth pangs of becoming a cohesive team that works together), as well as suffering, sacrifice and, ultimately, resurrection and redemption.

In this way, therefore, Jesus Christ is the “Greatest Superhero of Them All,” because His journey of Suffering, Sacrifice, and Resurrection is not only His journey. It’s also tied irretrievably to our own journey of Redemption and Resurrection, toward the Good, the True, and the Beautiful. For, without Christ, we can do nothing (John 15:5). But, with

Christ and His Sacrifice, “we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us” (Romans 8:37).

So, while you’re enjoying *The Avengers* this weekend with your family or friends (or anytime in the future, for that matter) please remember your “great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who sacrificed himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for Himself a people that are His very own, eager to do what is good” (Titus 2:13,14).