

TEXT: Psalm 8

July 24, 2005

FANTASTIC FOR

I love movies. In fact, I am a veritable filmaholic. I just can't seem to get enough of them. I'd go to the movies most every night of the week if I could! (Except those darn Trustees' meetings keep getting in the way!)

When I do go I'm not too picky about the type of movie I see. My all-time favorites include everything from musicals to sci-fi thrillers. I'm as happy with *The Wizard of Oz* or *West Side Story* as I am with tearjerkers like *Places in the Heart*, teenage rebellion flicks like *Easy Rider* and suspense thrillers like *The Sixth Sense*.

And I like summer blockbusters. I made sure I saw *War of the Worlds* very soon after it opened. It was great—right up until the last ten minutes. I even like those movies based on comic books. I thought this summer's *Batman Begins* was actually quite astute at points, and despite mixed reviews, I really enjoyed *Fantastic Four*.

In case you haven't seen it, *Fantastic Four* is based on a series of Marvel comic books dating back to 1961.

Four scientists on a space station get caught in an extraterrestrial storm which alters their DNA. When they return to earth they each discover they have acquired some new super power. Sue Storm, names are never subtle in comic books, takes on the ability to become invisible and to throw off a protective force field. Her playboy brother, Johnny, like Moses' bush, can burst into flames without burning up. Ben Grimm, I told you, nothing's subtle, turns into solid rock—though he can still move—and acquires super strength. And Reed Richards finds he can bend and stretch his boy into almost any conceivable shape.

At first the four friends try to reverse their powers, but eventually they realize that they can use them to fight crime and corruption. So they get nifty uniforms (you've got to have a nifty uniform to be a superhero), they take on nicknames (also mandatory for superheroes) and they set about the task of saving the world from villains like—here's another subtle name—Dr. Doom.

Soon the world knows them collectively as the Fantastic Four, and individually as the Invisible Woman, the Human Torch, the Thing (aren't you glad you didn't turn into solid rock) and Mr. Fantastic.

When I went on-line to find the times the movie would be playing at the local theatre I was delighted to discover that along with a synopsis, brief bios of the actors and a trailer of the film, there was an interactive on-line quiz. And this one—unlike so many on-line tests—looked really useful.

DISCOVER YOUR SUPERPOWER blared the website. Answer the following questions and determine your own superpower.

Who could resist? So I took the quiz. It was mostly multiple choice.

The first question (I'm not making this up) asked: "What's your best ability currently? a) Counting cards to always win at blackjack; b) Looking great in tight jeans; c) a green thumb—can make any plant grow or d) Can break dance better than Napoleon Dynamite?"

It was just the first question, and already I was stumped. This was harder than my doctoral dissertation defense!

I don't know how to play back jack, so that ruled out "a". As for tight jeans, hey, I'm a fifty-two year-old man, I always wear relaxed fit and hope the waist band is very forgiving! I've killed every plant that's ever been in my office . . . so I checked "d"—OK, I can't break dance, but I do a mean peppermint twist!

But I couldn't figure out the logic of the questions, and I was especially stumped by question seven: "Your [own] destiny is yours to decide. True or False."

True or False? For crying out loud I'm a Congregationalist! Where's the grey answer? Where's "sometimes yes and sometimes no?" Where's "only if by a 2/3 vote of the congregation"? Just to be safe, I checked both true and false.

Finally I got through the last question. I clicked on the button that said "Score" and with a blink and a flourish, the website revealed my hidden power—my ticket to comic book success. With it I too would be able to wear a cape, get a cool nickname and fight crime and corruption. John Danner, it said, you possess—are you ready for this?—**SUPER STRENGTH!** Yeah, right. And Arnold Schwarzenegger is going to be Governor of California some day.

Lots of fun—even we preachers need fun once in awhile. But the truth of the matter, from a biblical perspective, is this. We don't need superpowers to fight crime or corruption or pollution of poverty or hunger or anything else. We don't need to have our DNA altered to save the world from sure destruction. God has already given you and me the powers we need to make this world all that it can be.

Listen again to the opening verses from our scripture reading. For while it is, no question, a Psalm written in praise of God, while it is clearly a Psalm written to honor the holy Creator of the Universe, it is also an affirmation of human worth and human responsibility.

O Lord, our God,
how majestic is your name

in all the earth
When I look at your heavens,
the work of your fingers . . .
What are human beings that you
are mindful of them?
Yet you have made them a little
lower than God,
And crowned them with glory
and honor.
You have given them dominion
over the works of your
hands
(Psalm 8: 1a, 3a, 4-6a)

You and I, sisters and brothers, have been given responsibility for this wonderful planet of ours, and all that dwells therein. And we have already been given the ability, the power to take care of it. We don't need superpowers; rather we need to use the God-given powers we already have. And no matter who you are you do possess some such power.

Let me share with you my own personal list of candidates for inclusion among the Fantastic Four. Four men and women who do just that—who use the gifts God has given them to truly make our world better.

A little over a week ago at the corner of Broadway and West 100th in Manhattan, an old supermarket, sheathed in scaffolding, suddenly gave way, showering bricks and steel beams over the entire area. Caught beneath the rubble were several passersby. Neighbors and rescue workers began to clear away the debris. And one by one, they freed those who had been trapped.

Brick by brick, beam by beam, they cleared things away, when suddenly they saw an arm sticking out of the mess. And soon they made their way to where a woman was standing waist deep in rubble. She was screaming and pointing, “My baby! My baby!”

She had tried, it later turned out, to protect the infant from the falling bricks, but they had been separated by a steel beam.

The rescuers forged ahead, finally spotting the baby's stroller. “I touched its arm and its leg, and it was warm,” said one worker. (*New York Times*, 7-15-05, B-5) In a few minutes baby Abigail and her mother, with her broken arm and leg, were rushed to the hospital. And the mother's sheltering actions and insistent cries for help, saved the baby's life. Mother and child are doing fine.

Except for one thing. The woman, Brunildo Tirado, is not the baby's mother. She is her nanny. Why then, many wondered, had she cried out “My baby!”

Because, like thousands and thousands of nannies, au pairs, babysitters and child care workers, Brunildo Tirado does her work out of love for the children she cares for. They become like her own children. She isn't paid much. She probably doesn't get benefits. She and her fellow child care workers are often unrecognized and unnoticed. But she and her colleagues are charged with the care of our most precious resource, our children. She may not be able to disappear at will, but she knows the often unseen power of love, and she exercises it. Brunildo Tirado is a real Invisible Woman.

Pay a visit to Saugatuck Church and you may very well be met in the parking lot by a tall, balding fellow. He'll enthusiastically greet you and help you find your way through the maze of hallways which leads to the sanctuary. By the time you are done talking he'll know where you went to college, what you do for a living, where you live, even your favorite color. He'll have told you all about the congregation he loves.

If you have a daughter and you're new in town, he'll tell you about the Girls' Softball league. He'll offer to take you to a Rotary meeting. And if you are a man of a certain age, he'll invite you to attend the next session of the Y's Men. Later in the week you'll even get a personal letter from him, full of details.

If there's an organization, a cause or a person he's connected with, he gives it his all. He has more enthusiasm than anyone I know. He uses his gift of gab and his powers of persuasion to advance the good on so many fronts: First Night, CROP Walk, Pivot House and yes, fundraising ball games. He doesn't burst into flames, but he's certainly a ball of fire. If you ask me who's a real Human Torch, I'll point to our own Bill Meyers.

Back in the early twentieth century most women were brought up to expect that they would marry, raise children, keep a home and be provided for by a dutiful husband. She was no exception. And after high school she did just that. But shortly after her son was born, her first husband ran off and abandoned them, and so she went to work as a bookkeeper to support the two of them.

In a few years she married again. This time to a more reliable fellow, a Harvard-educated civil engineer. They had a daughter. And things went well until the great depression hit. Her husband lost his job and couldn't find another—and slowly slipped into mental collapse. He would never again work as an engineer.

So she once more took up the green visor and ledger and went to work for a local knitting mill. She was good, very good—and eventually was named Vice President of the firm.

Her son and daughter continued to grow and flourish under her strong guidance. In time, though she only had a high school education herself, both of her children

would earn PhDs. Her son would head up the State of Tennessee's Department of Wildlife, Fish and Game. Her daughter would become a college professor. Both would come to credit her solid support as part of the reason for their success. She had used her powers to the best of her ability and had made a real difference in the lives of her children, and through them in the lives of the countless constituents and students they would serve.

She was the solid foundation upon which the whole family was built. She couldn't turn into rock, but she was a rock. My nominee for *The Thing*? Sue Sherwood, my maternal grandmother.

One last candidate for the Fantastic Four. He served in the Army during the first Gulf War, and was fortunate enough to come home physically unscathed. He had been an All-American in track before he'd entered the service, so when he got home the Army had him train for the 1996 Olympic Trials. But then, in 1994, while running the course, he failed to clear a hurdle. When he landed he dislocated his knee and severed an artery. His left leg had to be amputated and he was outfitted with prosthesis.

At first he thought his days as an athlete were over. But then he learned about the Paralympics—an international competition for disabled athletes. First he qualified for swimming events, and then, in 2000, he ran the 200 meter race.

It transformed his life. And so, when asked, he agreed to serve as the head of the U. S. Olympic Committee's Paralympic Military Program.

Today he helps the many men and women who have been injured and maimed in Iraq and elsewhere adjust to their new lives as persons with disabilities. He exposes them to a wide variety of sports and helps them explore the possibilities. As one participant whose leg was lost after his time in Iraq put it, "It makes me realize I can do everything." (*New York Times*, 7-21-05, D-5)

He has helped hundreds of vets find a new lease on life. He's helped them adjust and adapt to the new realities of their world and to stretch further than they ever thought possible. He may not have a body that bends and moves into any shape, but he has used his body, and his mind, to help shape the lives of his comrades. As far as I'm concerned, Paralympian John Register is a real Mr. Fantastic.

So there you have it. My candidates for the Fantastic Four. A nanny, a retired salesman, a working mom and a disabled vet—none of them possess superpowers—yet all of them have used the powers they do have to make a real difference. They are a real Fantastic Four.

At the point in the movie where the four scientists are trying to undo their powers, one of them asks, "But what if we've been given these powers for a reason?" In time

they come to realize they have been given them for a reason, to make this a safer and better world.

And so too you and me. We don't need superpowers. We have after all been made a little lower than God. We have been given dominion over the earth. We have been given the responsibility and the power to make this a better world. So what will you do with your God-given powers? For like Brunildo, Bill, Sue and John you don't need superpowers. You are already fantastic!

**Amen
John H. Danner**