

This spring, not one, but two major entertainment franchises are coming to an end. The timing was not intentional, I'm sure, but it does seem a little cruel, as both comic book fans and fantasy genre fans – who are, let's face it, mostly the same fans – are having to say goodbye to two of their favorite fictional worlds, all in the same month. Last weekend saw the release of *Endgame*, the final installment of the Marvel-comic-books-come-to-life Avengers movies, and the last episode of the HBO mega-hit *Game of Thrones* airs later this month. Both series have introduced their viewers to a whole host of enduring characters, each with their own intricate, interweaving storylines that are, at long last, all brought together, finally, at the end.

The interesting thing is that both *Game of Thrones* and the Avengers have gotten so big, their plotlines so cosmic, that their final episodes are about the same thing – the end of all things. The heroes of both franchises have killed enough super-baddies and wicked witches that no mere villain was going to cut it for the final, final

battle. In both fictional worlds, this last of all battles has been against complete extermination, against oblivion, against Death itself.

In the Avengers movies, the superheroes are fighting a semi-god named Thanos who seeks to balance the cosmic scales by eliminating half of all living things in the universe, all with a mere snap of his fingers...while he's wearing a superglove fitted out with all six infinity stones, but we don't need to get in to all of that. Suffice it to say that in *Endgame*, the heroes make their final stand against Thanos, facing impossible odds in order to defeat him once and for all. In *Game of Thrones*, the final battle is against a dark, wizard-like creature known as the Night King who, while decidedly less chatty than Thanos, has a similar intent – to kill every last man, woman, and child on earth and add them to his blue-eyed, zombie-like army of the dead. It is only the fear of the Night King that brings all of the warring human factions of the show – and oh, how they have been warring – to fight together as one to defeat nothing less than death itself.

Now I feel like I should stop here and say something I have never said in a sermon before which is that there are no spoilers in this sermon. I've seen *Endgame* and I'm all caught up on *GOT*, but I'm not going to say anything in this sermon that will spoil either one for you. What I will say, that won't surprise any of you, is that both are filled to the brim with tremendous acts of courage. In the face of extinction, whether from the lethal snap of Thanos or the icy-blue fire of the Night King, the heroes of these worlds step up. They stand in defiance of evil even when they seem to be the only one left standing. They run wholeheartedly towards certain death simply because they have to try. They fight and fight and fight, backed into corners, bleeding and broken; they fight when there seems to be no end to the fight, they fight when there seems to be no chance, no victory, no survival in sight. They choose to do the hard thing because they know that it is the only right thing, even though they know that it means a full, final sacrifice. They are afraid of death, but they stand and fight

and choose the good – friendship, honor, love. They are afraid, but they fight anyway, which is the very definition of courage.

But none of them – I repeat, none of them – can hold a candle to Ananias. Not Captain America, not Thor, not the Black Widow or Jon Snow or Brienne of Tarth or Arya Stark – not the bravest, most self-sacrificial superhero or warrior you can imagine is as brave as this simple disciple named Ananias. For Ananias does something that these heroes cannot. Remember, he, too, is facing what must seem like the end times. Saul, a powerful, single-minded Pharisee whose heart has been twisted with hatred, is “breathing threats and murder” against these new Christians who are spreading the Gospel in these early days of the Church. Saul's persecution of the disciples is deeply ugly – he has supervised the stoning of the faithful deacon Stephen, he has, in the strong words of St. Luke, “ravaged the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women,” and he is now petitioning the high priest to take his violent rampage into

the city of Damascus. He wants to expand his territory by hundreds of miles, capture more and more men and women; Saul wants nothing less than the total annihilation of the Church.

This is Ananias's world. He knows that he is threatened, he knows that his friends are threatened, he knows that his Church is threatened, and he knows who the threat is. Saul is the one true enemy, the arch-villain of Ananias's story. Saul is the one man on earth who could destroy everything that Ananias loves with simply the snap of his fingers, with the whims of his blue-cold heart. But then Ananias has a vision. Jesus comes to him and says that he, Ananias, should go find Saul, lay hands on him, and heal him. Ananias protests, But, Lord, this is the one who has been destroying everything, the one who would kill us all. And Jesus tells Ananias the most remarkable news. Saul is the one, he says, the one I have chosen to spread the Gospel to the Gentiles. He will be my instrument, and so you must go and heal him.

And Ananias goes. This is why he is the bravest man in all of scripture. Ananias goes to Saul, the prey submits himself to the hunter, the persecuted presents himself to his persecutor. Ananias goes to Saul, empty-handed and alone. He does not take a knife made of Valyrian steel or a shield made of Vibranium. He takes absolutely nothing. He presents himself to Saul, lays hands on him, and he is healed. Saul regains his sight, or perhaps, gains true sight for the first time, and takes a new name. Paul becomes the apostle that Jesus knew he would be and forever changes the Church.

All of this is because Ananias, like a first-century superhero, is able to screw his courage to the sticking place and do the impossible. But here is the crucial difference between Ananias and AntMan: Ananias acts not out of duty only, nor out of obedience only; Ananias acts out of love. When Ananias meets Saul for the first time, this man who has been breathing threats and murder against him, this man who has surely killed some of his friends, Ananias

looks into his broken, useless eyes and calls him Brother. Brother Saul, he says. Brother Saul, I am here to heal you. Which is why Ananias deserves a medal, a parade, epic songs written about him, his own action figure. Because while it's one thing to stand in the face of death while you're decked in armor and ready to fight; it's quite another to stand in the face of death naked, vulnerable, bearing nothing but love.

The courage to fight is a good thing. There are times when all of us need to summon the courage to right an injustice, to speak truth against evil, to call out those who are doing harm, to raise our voices against the howling cruelty of powers and principalities. The courage to fight can be a good thing, something anyone with a conscience can and perhaps should do. But the courage to love, that is more than just a good thing, that is something disciples do. The courage to love your enemies, to reach out with nothing but heart in hand to those who have persecuted you, to stand before those who would destroy

you with a snap of their fingers and call them sister, brother – that is truly heroic.

Ananias can do this because Ananias knows something about death that the Avengers and the defenders of Winterfell do not. Those heroes are courageous in the face of death because they have no other choice; death is inevitable and so they face it without blinking. Ananias is courageous in the face of death because he knows the truth, that death is defeated, that death is inevitable but also impotent, that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ have stolen death's sting forever. There is no fight here any longer – the battle is won. And in Christ's victory, we have the freedom to love with the same courage with which Christ loved us.

There is something else that Ananias knows, too, something else that helps him find his courage. And that is that he never loves alone. The life-giving, redeeming love of Christ always precedes him. Christ first loved Saul, Christ's love was flooding Saul with light and

a call to a new and holy life. Ananias's love was born of that resurrection love, that second chance, third, fourth, fiftieth chance love. Which is very good news for us, because it means that we, too, never love alone. We, too, can have the courage to love, the courage to refuse to have our stories be shaped by the powers of evil. So in these days that at times feel very much like a kind of Endgame, claim your own true identity as a disciple, just like Ananias. Know that you have been chosen to have the power of Christ's infinite love coursing through your veins, and on this resurrection morning, face the world with courage, not just the courage to fight, but the courage to love. It will heal the world.

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