

Man of Steel (2013)

Synopsis

When the planet Krypton is about to be destroyed, Jor-El sends his only son across a sea of stars to a new world in the hope that he can save that world from following in Krypton's fate. Krypton is undergoing a civil war at the time and General Zod plans on claiming from Jor-El an ancient piece of technology that contains all of Krypton's knowledge. But it is too late: Jor-El has sent the codex, this powerful piece of technology, to Earth with his son.

Kal-El arrives on Earth and is taken in by a farmer and his wife and raised as their own and he is given the name of Clark Kent. However Kal-El has superpowers and never really fits in on this new world. He lives in fear that someone will find out what he is and take him away from his new mother and father. However when a rare Krypton ship is found in the middle of the North Pole Kal-El goes in search of answers and finds out the reason why he was sent to Earth.

When General Zod appears, Kal-El is forced to step up and find out what Zod is up to. When he finds out the plan is to turn Earth into a new Krypton by killing all the humans and changing the planet's core, Kal-El must try and stop him before it is too late, even though this might mean the end to his own people and his civilisation. Kal-El's battle culminates in a final standoff with General Zod where he is forced to choose between killing General Zod and the last of his civilisation, or saving a human family. In the end Kal-El sacrifices his own moral standards (never to kill another being) to save the human race from the terror of General Zod. Having chosen, he is Superman, who now conceals his identity as a reporter at the Daily Planet.

Themes

Destiny, finding your own way in the world

"You will give the people an ideal to strive towards. They will race behind you, they will stumble, and they will fall. But in time, they will join you in the sun. In time, you will help them accomplish wonders." (Russell Crowe, Jor-El)

This is a message that Jor-El gives Kal-El about what he has planned for his son's future. As children we all have to struggle against the weight of the future's expectations; and that weight is never as heavy to bear as when we are children, with our whole lives before us. Most children struggle to find out what they want to do with their lives and who they are, often trying on different personalities and trying different things in order to find out what they want to do. However Kal-El must try to fit into a world where he does not quite belong. He asks himself whether the world will accept him for who he truly is, or will they turn on him out of fear?

Kal-El spends most of his childhood trying to come to grips with this destiny. When Kal-El saves the children on his school bus from drowning, one of the parents says "it was an act of God." Kal-El asks his adopted father: "Is she right? Did God do this to me?" Here we can see Kal-El struggling to find himself, not sure whether or not his powers are a blessing or a curse. This struggle continues into his adulthood as Kal-El wanders trying to find his place. As Lois Lane (Amy Adams) puts it: "For some, he was a guardian angel. To others, a ghost who never quite fit in."

He finally comes to accept his destiny after a conversation with Jor-El's consciousness. Kal-El struggles to fulfil his father's wish of becoming a beacon of hope for humanity when General Zod come to earth and asks Kal-El to help him build a new Krypton on Earth. However when Kal-El finds

out this means destroying all the humans, he fights Zod on behalf of the human race. The struggle inside Kal-El is as important as his outward actions for he shows that even the best of us struggles with our inner desires and temptations.

Sacrifice and Redemption

“He’ll be an outcast, a freak, they’ll kill him” Lara-El

Right from the start sacrifice is an important theme of the film. Jor-El gives up his son to be raised on another planet by other people knowing that he will never quite be accepted by them but he does this so that humanity might have the redemption that Krypton never had. Kal-El also sacrifices himself for humanity when General Zod asks the world to surrender Kal-El to him. Kal-El surrenders himself even though he knows that by doing so he could be going to his death. Lois Lane asks him why he is surrendering to General Zod and Kal-El’s reply is, “I’m not, I’m surrendering to mankind”. When Kal-El is still a boy his human father Jonathan sacrifices his life when a tornado suddenly appears so that his son can continue to have a normal childhood. This is a common theme in the film: fathers giving their lives so that their children can live. In the end Kal-El must also sacrifice his own scruples in order to save the world; giving his soul for the good of the world.

Free will

“What if a child dreamed of becoming something other than what society had intended? What if a child aspired to something greater?” Jor-El

On the planet Krypton, the home world of Kal-El, every child is born artificially and genetically engineered to have a purpose in Krypton society. Kal-El is the first natural birth on Krypton in hundreds of years with the freedom to choose his own pathway and destiny. General Zod, from the day he is born, is bred to be a warrior: that is his purpose in his society. He must protect Krypton no matter what the cost and even if it means genocide. General Zod’s fate therefore shows us how important free will is to choose our fate and the kind of person we become. Kal-El on the other hand is free to choose his own path, to do as he wishes. He has the gift of free will and even though he is an outcast in human society he chooses to battle for humanity; not because he is forced to but because he wants too.

Faith and trust in others

Throughout the story faith is an important issue: the faith Jor-El has in his son to make the world a better place; the faith that Kal-El has in humanity despite being an outcast; the faith that Kal-El’s adopted parents Martha and Jonathan Kent have in their son to be the man he wants to be; the faith that Lois Lane has in Kal-El despite the fact that she knows nothing really about him.

Kal-El is guided by his faith in humanity, even when they sacrifice him to the Kryptonians he never gives up hope. But faith and trust is a two way street, for humanity must have faith in Kal-El and Kal El must have faith in human beings and only together are they able to defeat the invading Kryptonians.

Salvation

Jor-El’s faith in his son is summarised toward the end of the film when he tell Kal-El “ you can save her, you can save them all”. Jor-El has complete faith in his son to save the world despite the all the obstacles and trials that lie ahead of him. The title ‘Man of Steel’, as another name for Superman,

refers to the fact that his skin is harder than metal, but it also has a deeper meaning because it can refer to his iron will and his unbending faith in human beings.

Excerpts to watch

- Jor El sends Kal-El to Earth and sacrifices himself
- Dream sequence when General Zod enters into Kal-El's mind and Kal-El realises that Zod's plan entails the death of all humanity.
- Jonathan Kent sacrifices himself for Kal-El's secret
- Kal-El is forced to kill General Zod

Discussion Questions

"No matter how violent, every action I take is for the greater good of my people." (General Zod, Michael Shannon). Do you think that that violence should ever be used for the greater good?

At what points in this story might you see similarities between Kal-El and Jesus Christ?

What does this film tell us about the role of Family?

Imagine you were Kal-El. How might you have felt when you were growing up? What would it be like to be different? How might you feel when faced with having to kill General Zod?

Philip C Davies

Using the Bible

If you want to, you might find some Bible passages help with your discussion:

Jesus in the Temple: Luke 2.41-52

The Temptation of Jesus: Luke 4. 1-13

Jesus before Pilate: John 18.33-38.

Sacrifice: John 15:12-13