

For a little over a decade now, it seems comic book movies are king. People, myself included, love to go to the theater and maybe relive a little part of our childhood, or get engaged in the story of a favorite superhero who goes out and saves the world.

And along with the rise in popularity of movies, comes legions of fans who are into the comics themselves. As such, comic book conventions or “comic cons” have become pretty common too.

A big name in the industry is an illustrator by the name of Billy Tucci. But while he’s drawn various fictional superheroes, the one he is most proud of isn’t fictional at all.

Just over ten years ago, he found himself at a convention in Dallas. Looking at the crowd, he was amused by the colorful crowd before him. He recognized many of the superhero outfits he’d drawn over the years: Batman, The Flash, Captain America.

Fans had come dressed as their favorite character to hear him talk about his latest graphic novel, The Lost Battalion. Based in history, Billy had done

a lot of research on the story of the 36th Infantry Division, trapped and surrounded in the mountains of northeast France during World War II, and reworked it as a vehicle for DC Comics' hero Sgt. Rock.

"Sergeant Rock is a great character," he told the crowd, "but this man next to me is a real-life hero." Billy introduced them to Lt. Colonel Eliel "Arch" Archilla of the 405th Fighter Squadron, a living, breathing veteran of the Battle of the Lost Battalion. "He's the one you should be listening to."

Arch regaled the crowd with stories of flying fighter planes in WWII, the Lost Battalion's rescue by Japanese-American soldiers, even meeting Babe Ruth. Billy was as enthralled as the audience by Arch's stories.

No matter how many superheroes Billy has written and illustrated as an artist, he says his biggest heroes were all real-life people like Arch, or the men of the 141st. Real life and real heroes. They'd always interested Billy. He says he supposed that's why he wanted to do The Lost Battalion.

After the conference Arch introduced Billy to his grandson, Evan. He invited him out for dinner. “How did you get into writing comic books?” he asked as the two had dinner.

“It wasn’t my original plan,” Billy admitted. He told Evan how he’d gone to FIT in New York to study fashion illustration. Many of Billy’s friends at school were into comic books. The more he looked at them, the more he wanted to do them too.

And so he submitted his work to the “big two” publishers, DC and Marvel Comics, but Billy always got rejected. He says they’d tell him their work wasn’t their style, so he focused on self-publishing. And it was here he got an idea.

In his classes he had studied woodblocks from medieval Japan. He got interested in the country’s history and read everything he could about Japan. That research inspired him to create a new character.

A modern woman with a Japanese father and an American mother, “Shi” was drafted into a shadow war between the descendents of the warrior

monks of medieval Japan. She sought vengeance on the people who killed her father, but has been taught by her Christian mother to forgive.

There was plenty of adventure and excitement to be had in Shi, but to Billy it was really a story about faith. To his surprise, the book was a huge hit. Suddenly everyone wanted to work with hm. They let him write whatever he wanted. Almost.

“So it looks like you created your own magnum opus,” said Evan.

Billy hesitated. Shi would always be close to his heart. He loved creating it, and its unexpected success had been a blessing for Billy and Deborah and their two sons, William and Matthew. But truth be told, it wasn’t the story he dreamed of telling.

He’d never told anyone about the project he secretly longed to do, but for some reason he suddenly wanted to confide in Evan. “Actually,” he said, “what I really want to do is spread the Gospel.”

Evan’s eyebrows rose.

“I’d love to tell the Christmas story,” he said. “Just like it happens in the Bible, in graphic novel form. I could never sell a publisher on it, I know. But if I could pick anything in the world to do, that would be it.”

Billy returned home to New York the following day. He hoped Evan didn’t think he was nuts, telling him his idea about the Christmas story. Drawing Batman comics was one thing, but illustrating the Bible?

A week later, Evan called me with a proposal: “How would you like a partner on that Christmas story book you wanted to do?” He and a friend from his church, Jason Peet, flew Billy back to Texas to discuss the details.

Evan and Jason loved all his ideas and agreed right then and there to finance the project. Flying home on the plane, he couldn’t believe this was happening. Real life, real heroes. Just like he’d always wanted. Yet instead of being thrilled, Billy was scared!

“Is this the right time to do this?” he asked his wife Deborah when he got home.

“When isn’t the right time to focus on the Christmas story?” she said.

Billy threw himself into sketching, plotting out storyboards. He drafted Deborah, the boys, and many of their friends for artist’s models.

He cleared all the furniture out of the living room and arranged a tableau: Deborah stood in for the innkeeper. William and Matthew took up their hockey sticks to play shepherds leading a herd of stuffed dinosaurs.

Little by little, it all came together. But would anyone buy it? Not his usual comic book audience, he figured. But somebody sure liked it. *A Child Is Born* was the most reordered graphic novel in both December 2011 and January 2012.

A few months after publication Billy attended another comics conference, back in the world of capes and spandex. He signed a lot of copies of *The Lost Battalion* and *Shi*. Just after lunch he was approached by a young man in a Batman t-shirt who handed him a book to sign: *A Child Is Born*.

He wasn't the last person—or even the last Batman—to bring him that book to sign that day. A lot of those people stayed to talk a while about their faith, and Christmas, and what it meant to them.

Billy thought his usual comics audience wouldn't be interested in a Christmas story. But it turns out many of them agree: Jesus really is the greatest superhero of them all.

Hopefully we appreciate that too. And much like in a superhero movie you hear the story of the hero's origins, then what he does, and then at the end of the movie a teaser about how the hero will come back for another adventure in a future film, Advent gives us a chance to reflect on the presence of Jesus; in the past, in the present, and in the future.

First, the historical Jesus. The Old Testament gives us many predictions and glimpses of the coming of Christ; hear the words from Isaiah: "The days are coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfil the promise I made to the house of Israel and Judah. In those days, in that time, I will raise up for David a just shoot; he shall do what is right and just in the land." Advent in-

vites us to look back on the historical coming of our Lord; and ask ourselves do we appreciate how much this matters? We even define history by it - in terms of BC "before Christ" and "AD" "after death." We look back and can see in that time in history, much like our own, Christ coming into a world filled with war, division, animosity, racism, hate, despair. But God chose to enter this world as a frail infant and through how He lived, showed us how to love. How do we appreciate that coming, and then come to want to know this real life superhero who wants to redeem us?

The answer is found in Christ in the present. In comic books superheroes don't stay on their home planets or in their lairs; they are involved in the lives of humans even though they don't have to be with all their powers. So where do we find Jesus in the here and now? In the Church; which He created. The Church is where we celebrate the sacraments and receive Communion. It's through whom we receive guidance in the faith. Remember the Church was created by Christ. Which is why we want to stay connected to the Church, and why being at Mass is so important. But superheroes often wear disguises or go hidden too; Clark Kent is really Superman; Bruce Wayne is batman. So in the present, it's worth thinking of how do we see Jesus in one another too? Paul says it best in our second reading: "may the

Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all.” As we begin Advent, what better time to think about how we love one another. We can strive to be a people who are tolerant and compassionate; we can strive to see Jesus in the poor; and in those we need to strive to forgive, mindful of the words of our Lord “whatever you do for the least of these brothers of mine you do for me.”

And lastly, Advent reminds us of the coming of Jesus at the end of time. One day we will stand before our Lord. Jesus in our Gospel tells us to be ready lest that day catch us by surprise like a trap. Paul in our second reading tells his flock to think about how we conduct ourselves in a way to please God. It’s what is meant by “God fearing Christian,” not the fear of God being out to harm us or get us, but the fear of not wanting to let God down by making poor choices. Advent gives us the chance to say “OK, how am I doing in my life, where are my priorities, how am I preparing my life for the day when I will stand before God. We can look at what sins we’ve been battling and go to confession and come up with game plans to confront them; we can look at how we treat one another; we can look at the choices we make and strive to become better. We should never just coast through

life and say “I’ve done enough” but strive to daily grow in grace and holiness preparing for the time we’ll meet Jesus. We also are mindful we have work to do in this world too. Like the superhero who is engaged in the world, that’s you and me. Christ defeats death and sin on the Cross; but of course work remains. Through Jesus we are saved, but we are also called to action to love as Jesus did. So as we prepare for meeting Jesus again, how do we bring about the Kingdom through our daily lives? How do we as a people of hope make this world a better place by being involved in it through actions of love and mercy?

Yes, this world has a lot of problems. I find myself often getting frustrated and angry about various things going on and it’s easy to worry, get angry, or get dejected. But the answer isn’t to just forget about this world and try to escape reality. The answer is in Jesus Christ. Think of the words the priest says at the Easter Vigil when the candle is blessed: “Christ yesterday and today; the Beginning and the End; the Alpha and the Omega. All time belongs to him and all the ages.” This isn’t a God who is distant or removed. These Christmas stories we hear in coming weeks aren’t works of fiction to escape or forget reality. No, this is a God who is alive and with us - who came, who is here now, and who will come again. So let us use this holy

season to ask ourselves what that means to us as His followers, striving to come to know Him and make Him known to one another.