

The Gospel according to Disney: Remember Who You Are

July 25, 2021

Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

Matthew 3:13-17

So, today we are starting a new series. And this is a series that I've wanted to do for a long time, but maybe have just never been brave enough to try to pull off.

I've told you all before – on many occasions – that I “think in Disney.” Whether it's from having young kids, or always feeling like a kid at heart myself, I have always held a deep appreciation for story, and good storytelling. I've always believed that a deep truth can be conveyed far more powerfully if there is a story behind it, than if it is simply lectured, or preached at somebody – a belief that Jesus seems to have held as well, judging by the number of times he used parables – stories – easy-to-understand images – to illustrate complicated divine truths.

And from my generation, some of the most deeply-beloved stories have come in the form of Walt Disney's animated movies.

Now, I want to start at the outset here and just state the obvious: these movies are fun, but they are not the Bible. The story of The Lion King, which we are looking at today, is not sacred scripture, and as such, we should not approach it as if it were. However, as we will see over the next five weeks, many of these movies touch on themes and questions that do happen to be deeply-rooted in scripture. And it's at that intersection point – between the sacred questions that the movies ask, and the sacred answers that scripture offers us – it's at this intersection that we are going to be hanging out in for the next several weeks.

So, let's talk a little bit about Walt Disney, because I find his story really fascinating. Walt was the son of Flora and Elias Disney. He was the youngest of four boys – Herbert, Raymond and Roy – and he also had a little sister named Ruth.

Walt's Father Elias was born in 1859 in Ontario, Canada, and was raised in a VERY strict Wesleyan Methodist Church – so strict that music and dancing were strictly forbidden. The story goes that Elias took up the fiddle, and kept it secret from his parents. But one day his mother discovered him performing on his fiddle at a dance, and smashed the instrument over his head, because “the devil was in the fiddle.”

When Elias grew up, he and his wife Flora moved to Chicago and began attending a Congregational Church, and really got very active there. Flora played the organ; and Elias preached on occasion when the pastor would go out of town. Pretty much all they ever heard from the pulpit was hellfire and damnation. As kids Walt and his siblings were never allowed to play or read a book on Sundays, and they would get a whipping or a beating any time they failed to show up for early morning prayers, or any time they

were found reading “frivolous” books, instead of reading the Bible. And as his older brothers would grow up and move away from home, his father always believed that they were abandoning both him and God, and claimed that they had “sold their souls to the devil.”

Understandably, with this kind of upbringing, Walt didn’t have a whole lot of interest in the church when he grew up. However, those who knew him said that even though he wasn’t a churchgoer, he was a man of deep faith. He abandoned the organizational structures of religion, but he never walked away from God. In 1949 he wrote an article for Guideposts in which he said

“I believe firmly in the efficacy of religion, in its powerful influence on a person’s whole life. It helps immeasurably to meet the storm and stress of life and keep you attuned to the Divine inspiration. Without inspiration, we would perish. All I ask of myself, ‘Live a good Christian life.’ Toward that objective I bend every effort in shaping my personal, domestic, and professional activities and growth.”

Then he went on to say that

“Because young Americans are ‘highly intelligent,’ lecturing to children is no answer to delinquency. Preaching won’t keep youngsters out of trouble, but keeping their minds occupied will.”

So that is what he set out to do. To provide good, clean entertainment that would capture kids’ imaginations and that could keep them occupied and out of trouble. He actually had a strict policy in his company against overtly religious films (I think probably as a reaction to his strict religious upbringing), but nevertheless he would “sneak” Christian themes into his films in ways that would capture the hearts of both kids and adults alike.

So, jump to the Lion King.

The Lion King was released in the year 1994. It actually came at the tail end of a series of several smash hits, including *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and *Aladdin*, and then *The Lion King* just basically blew the socks off of all of them. It is *that* good.

It’s the story of a young lion cub named Simba, who is the son of Mufasa, the king of Pride Rock. Mufasa is a strong and benevolent king. Even though he is a predator who hunts and kills for food, he has a deep admiration and respect for all life – even life at the bottom of the food chain. And he tries to instill this care and respect into his young son, who seems to be totally enamored by the idea of growing up and becoming king and doing whatever he wants, just because he can.

Meanwhile, Mufasa has a younger brother named Scar – who is the villain of the story. Scar would have been second in line to the throne, had it not been for Simba being born and taking his spot. You remember last week when I talked about all kinds of shenanigans that folks would play when they thought they might have a chance at becoming king? Yep, that’s what happens here.

Scar is jealous of Simba. And so, with the help of his friends the mangy hyena,s he concocts a plan to kill his brother *and* his nephew, and to take over as king.

And his plan almost works. He kills Mufasa, he makes Simba believe that it was *his* fault his father died, he instructs Simba to run away, and then he instructs the hyenas to kill the cub. But, unknown to Scar, Simba manages to escape.

He finds himself far away from home, and istaken in by two new friends, Timon and Pumbaa, a meerkat and a warthog who live by the motto “Hakuna Matata” – “no worries.” “When the world turns its back on you, you turn your back on the world.” No responsibilities, no pressures, just do whatever you want, whenever you want.

Which was kind-of glorious for Simba, as he grew up from a young cub through adolescence and into a strong young adult lion. A carefree life, free of pressure and responsibility and authority.

Except, that that was not who he was born to be. Simba was born to be king. And his kingdom desperately needed him, now more than ever before. One night, the ghost of his father – or maybe simply the memory of his father – meets him in the clouds and utters those eternal words “Remember who you are.”

And that’s what does it. Simba returns home to Pride Rock, discovers the truth about how his father died, challenges his uncle for the throne, and takes his rightful place as king. The Pride Lands are restored to their former glory, Simba and his childhood sweetheart Nala have their own lion cub, and the Circle of Life continues on. The end.

It’s a sweet story; a feelgood story; a story that plays with the themes of life and death; of care and responsibility. But at its heart, it asks the profound question: Who are you? And even more to the point: Who were you born to be? Or in our language as Christians, Who are you called to be? Who are you created to be? Who does God say you are?

Our scripture reading today is one that we actually read earlier this year – back in January, I think. The story from Matthew’s gospel of Jesus being baptized. We’ve just come from the story of Jesus’ birth and the flight of his family into Egypt to escape the murderous King Herod (turns out, Walt Disney is not the only one who writes stories about corrupt kings looking to “off” potential threats to their kingdoms – even if these so-called “threats” are little more than children). And then, Matthew skips right over the stories of Jesus’s childhood and adolescence and early adulthood and picks up again when Jesus is 30 years old and his cousin John the Baptist has made a name for himself by scaring the bageezes out of people and baptizing them in the Jordan River.

Jesus himself comes to be baptized, and John argues with him. “You don’t need to be baptized, Jesus. Of all people, you don’t. You should be baptizing me, not the other way around.” But nonetheless John takes him down into the water and baptizes him. And

when Jesus rises up out of the water again, the heavens open and the Spirit of God is unleashed and descends upon Jesus in the form of a dove. And a voice from heaven booms out (I picture it sounding something like Mufasa's voice – the voice of James Earl Jones): "This is my son. The beloved. With him I am well-pleased."

And that is the moment Jesus's ministry begins. The moment God declares "this is who you are." "You are my son. The beloved." And from that moment until the time he was taken up into heaven, his life was spent living that identity out. Becoming who God said he was.

This naming, this claiming, this calling – this was not something that was unique to Jesus, just because he was the Son of God. In truth, God meets every single one of us. The Holy Spirit pours out upon each of us and declares to us as well – "You are God's child. And because God tells us who we are; because God names us and claims us; because God ordains us with a purpose, we know who we are. We may not always live into it; we may get confused at times and try to live as though we were somebody else. But from the very beginning. From the moment we take our first breath; from the moment we are marked by the waters of baptism, our identity is set, and it does not change. This is who we are: we are children of God. Children of the king. Heirs to a promise. Citizens of the kingdom of God. Members of the body of Christ.

And the rest of our lives are all about those words that Mufasa boomed to Simba from the clouds: Remember who you are. Not "remember who you used to be"; not "think of who you could become"; not "who do you wish you were," but "remember who you are." Remember who God has created *you* to be. Remember who you have *always* been. Remember the God who said to you "this is my son." "This is my daughter." "I choose *you*."

Because the truth is, no matter where we run; no matter how far we stray; no matter what direction life takes us; no matter what choices we make; no matter how many times we sin, and turn our backs on God, and forget who we are; whose we are, and who we are created to be – that is something that never goes away. We were created in the image of God. We were created *out of God*. God's very breath gives us life, and God's Spirit dwells within our spirit. When we are living in the light of Christ, our very being mirrors to other people characteristics of the God who made us. We may not mirror all the same characteristics – some of us shine God's justice, and others, God's generosity, and others, God's splendor, and still others, God's creativity. Some people are created to mirror God's attention to detail, or God's commitment and loyalty, or God's playfulness, or God's integrity, or God's peace. But all of us were created to shine a bit of God into the world around us, just by virtue of our being.

This is who we are, as children of the king.

And even though we may forget this; even though we may lose sight of who we are; even though we may try to *change* who we are or become like somebody else, God continuously calls out to us. Remember who you are, and remember whose you are.

In the words of the prophet Isaiah:

*“Was it not the Lord who created you, O Jacob?
Was it not the Lord who formed you, O Israel?
Was it not he who said ‘I have redeemed you;
I have summoned you by name. You are mine.”*

And as God’s children, God is calling us to open our eyes and take our place in the great “circle of life.” In the kingdom of God – where all of us have our role to play, and where all of us are critical to the spiritual health of one another.

So my friends – children of God – beloved of God – let me ask you today: What little bit of God’s image shines on your soul? What characteristics of God have you, uniquely, been created to shine into the world around you?

Now may we all remember who we are – and may we go, and be God’s hands and feet in the world.