

The Gospel According to Disney sermon series  
The Lion King  
June 2, 2024  
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One of my first true loves was a cute red-headed girl. She was spunky, adventurous, and had a great singing voice. She was also an excellent swimmer, probably because she had fins instead of legs and lived “under the sea.” I remember dragging my little sister multiple times to the theater to see “The Little Mermaid” when it came out in 1989, to the point that we could both sing “Part of Your World” from memory. And often did.

The movies of the Walt Disney company have become a transcendent part of our culture, shaping generations of young people as they have seen them in theaters, watched them on VHS and DVD, and streamed them from the Disney+ app. These movies have made significant contributions to how people understand the world, the concept of good and evil, even their own identities. How many of us or our kids or grandkids wanted to be princesses like Cinderella or fly like Peter Pan or have a deformed spine and work in a church like the Hunchback of Notre Dame? OK, that last one never really caught on.

Whether intended or not, these movies also have shaped us from a religious viewpoint. While none of them are explicitly religious, almost all of them have spiritual components, representing aspects of the gospel that help us see how God is at work in our lives and in the world. This summer, we’re going to the movies to look for the gospel in Disney.

We’re starting with one of the most popular Disney movies of all-time, that not only was an original movie but spawned a number of sequels, a live-action version, and an incredibly popular Broadway play. It also has the most famous opening scene of any Disney movie. As the sun rises above the horizon on the African savannah, we hear, “Pennsylvania! Back of peaches, mama.” Or something like that. My Zulu needs some work.

As we see a montage of African wildlife, the opening song proclaims, “It’s the circle of life, and it moves us all, through despair and hope, through faith and love, till we find our place, on the path unwinding in the circle, the circle of life.” Did you catch that? At the end of 1 Corinthians 13, the love chapter, Paul says, “And now faith, hope, and love, these three remain.” Just as the circle of life moves us through despair and hope, through faith and love.

Toward the end of the opening song, we see a ceremony in which the baboon Raffiki, who’s like a priest figure in the movie, takes the newborn lion cub of King Mufasa, anoints him, and hold him up on Pride Rock for all the animals to see. The clouds part and the sun breaks through and shines on the child, Simba. One can’t help but think of early in Jesus’ life when he is baptized by John the Baptist, and as he comes out of the water, the skies part and a dove descends on him. “You are my son, with whom I am well-pleased.” The son of the king, anointed to lead the King’s people.

Now, Simba is way too little to understand the significance of what’s happening, just as a baby has no idea what’s happening at her baptism other than a person in a robe is trying to drown her while her parents look on. And even when we baptize people as youth, none of them really know the significance of what’s happening. Really, do any of us? What does it mean to go through the waters of baptism, to be claimed by God, to hear “You are my child, with whom I am well pleased?” Do any of us really know what that means?

Maybe that’s why it’s so easy to forget it, to let ourselves be drawn away from the light of God’s love into the darker places. That’s what happens to Simba. Thanks to some nudging from

his nefarious uncle Scar, Simba and his friend Nala venture to the Elephant Graveyard, into the shadows beyond the light of the savannah. Even though he was destined to be king over all the land, he was tempted to go to the one place that was forbidden to him. Sound familiar? In the Garden of Eden, God gives Adam and Eve access to all the pleasures of the garden, save for the fruit of one particular tree. Three guesses as to which fruit they chose to eat. Like human, like lion.

But Simba doesn't learn his lesson. Tricked once again by the evil Scar, he ventures into a canyon, where Scar's hyena minions chase a stampede of wildebeest. In an effort to rescue his son, King Mufasa gets trapped and... well, this is a Disney movie, so you know exactly what happens. I have no idea why Disney movies are so anti-parent, but when you think about it, in almost every movie a parent is either absent, dead, or dies. Bambi's mom, Cinderella's dad, the Little Mermaid's mom, Belle's mom... and now Mufasa. I'll admit that Amy and I watched both the original version and the live-action remake this week, and both times we fast-forwarded through this scene. As someone who's lost a dad and a dog in the last six months, this was a bit much, Disney. Cool it with the dead parents.

OK, rant over, back to Simba. Scar convinces him that Simba is responsible for his father's death and tells him to run away and never come back. And Simba believes him. He believes that he is as bad a person as Scar thinks he is and that no one on Pride Rock will ever forgive him for what he's done to his father. Simba no longer believes he is the anointed heir apparent to the throne. He forgets who he was meant to be.

Have you ever had an identity crisis? I remember once I was depositing a check at my bank and the teller looked at the name on the check and said, "Kory Wilcoxson?" I said, "Yep." She said, "Ok. Is she with you?" And I replied, "Lady, I AM her!" Other times in my life, my actions, by thoughts, my treatment of others or my view of myself has betrayed the message I received at my baptism. "You are my son. With you I am well-pleased."

Sometimes, we're pretty sure we've screwed up in a way that means we are no longer welcome in our community or congregation or family. Sometimes, we're sure we've messed up in a way that means we no longer belong to God. Sometimes, we believe that we've done something that can't be forgiven. So, we run away from God. And in doing so, we run away from our true selves.

Simba's flight from home leads him through the desert wilderness and into another part of the jungle, where he meets a warthog and a meerkat who teach him the philosophy, "Hakuna Matata!" As they sing, it means no worries for the rest of your days, leaving behind any guilt or shame or concern for others and living in the moment. Simba is able to live this lie for a long time until he is found and confronted by his childhood friend, Nala. She tells him that Scar is ruining the kingdom and the animals need Simba to return and become the king he was anointed to be. He refuses, believing that, because of what he's done, he's no longer his father's son.

And that leads us to the most powerful scene of the movie. Sometime later, Rafiki the baboon finds Simba and tells him that he is someone from his past, someone who knows his father. Simba replies, "You knew my father?" to which Rafiki responds, Correction, I know your father." "I hate to tell you this," Simba says sadly, "but he died. A long time ago." The old priest dances around. "Nope, wrong again. He's alive. I'll show him to you."

Simba chases after the priest figure until they come to a pool of water. Rafiki tells him, "There he is. Down there." Simba looks in the pool. "That's not my father, that's just my reflection." The baboon says, "No. Look again." Simba looks more closely and the reflection begins to morph into the image of his father.

That's when Rafiki tells him, "You see, he lives in you." Then Mufusa, voiced by James Earl Jones, says "Simba, you have forgotten me. You have forgotten who you are. And so forgotten me. Look inside yourself, Simba. You are more than what you have become." When Simba argues that he can't go back, the reflection in the water slowly fades, but the voice continues to echo: "Remember who you are, you are my son and the one true king. Remember who you are. Remember who you are. Remember who you are." "Luke, I am your father." Oops, sorry! Wrong father voiced by James Earl Jones.

So Simba, the prodigal son, returns home, defeats his uncle Scar, and reclaims his place as anointed king, the son of Mufasa. The movie ends with the glory of Pride Rock being restored and Rafiki baptizing a new baby lion cub, this one the son of Simba and Nala. "The Circle of Life..."

"Remember who you are." Some of us need to hear that. We have diverted our gaze from the One who gave us life, who called us by name, who offered us the grace and freedom of a life lived in Christ. As Paul reminds us in Romans, through baptism we died to our old selves, just as Jesus died on the cross, and we arose to new life, just as Jesus was resurrected. No matter what mistakes we've made, no matter how far we've run, we can never outrun God's love for us.

Some of us have run away all at once, like Simba, but others of us have moved away from God one step at a time. As the demands of life mount, as our small disappointments add up, as our little mistakes grow into big mistakes in our minds, one day we look up and find ourselves in the wilderness, removed from the reassurance of God's love for us. And, if we're honest, sometimes it's easier or more comfortable to stay in the wilderness singing about not having any worries than it is to pursue the work of reclaiming who God created us to be.

We may not see God appear in the sky, but the message to us is the same. If we forget who we are, we forget who God is, because we were created in the image of God, and God is within us. That's the promise given to us at the very beginning of Genesis, a promise as true to us today as it was to Adam and Eve. We are made in God's image. When we look into those baptismal waters, we see the image of God in each of us.

No matter how far we've moved away, in our heart of hearts, we know who we are. We are more than our mistakes. We are more than our job titles or to-do lists. We are more than the victims of life's circumstances or the targets of other people's anxiety. Whenever we are tempted to forget, whenever we feel that we've moved outside the reach of God's love, God's forgiveness, we don't have to stay there. We simply need to remind ourselves that God's claim on us is irrevocable. We are God's child, with whom God is well-pleased. Remember who you are. Remember who you are. Remember who you are.