

The Gospel According to Disney sermon series
Tangled
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Well, here's a familiar story to us. A spunky, independent, strong-willed girl is held captive. She has an antagonistic relationship with a decidedly un-prince-like character, but slowly develops feelings for him. When he sacrifices his life to save her, her love for him brings him back to life and they live happily ever after as a prince and princess. Yes, we all know the story of "Beauty and the Beast." But that's also the exact plot of "Tangled." I don't know about you, but Disney may be running out of movie ideas.

We continue our "Gospel according to Disney" sermon series, in which we have found the good news of Jesus Christ embedded in stories about witches and dwarfs, lions and aliens, marionettes and snowmen. Today, we're looking for the good news in the 2010 story of a young woman with a case of wanderlust and some seriously luxurious locks.

Rapunzel comes by her hair in a supernatural way. The tale comes to us from the brothers Grimm, featured in their 1812 publication of children's stories. The original probably goes back to an Italian fairy tale, "Petrosinella," written by Giambattista Basile in 1634. In Disney's version, a king and queen have a baby, but queen almost dies in childbirth. She is healed by a magical flower that has grown from a seed dropped from heaven, and their little girl is born with magical hair that glows with healing powers when she sings. The baby is kidnapped by Gothel, who uses those powers to stay young, which is a much more dangerous and risky method than buying a good face cream and some Botox. Rapunzel grows up locked in a tower, believing that Gothel is her mom and the outside world is a dangerous place to be avoided.

When I was a youth minister, I had some kids like that. Their parents had good intentions for raising them, but the parents were so fearful and protective that they locked their kids away, not exposing them to the evils of the world, like rock music and PG-13 movies and video games and smiling. I once had a parent chew me out for letting her daughter listen to a horrible-sounding rock song that was sure to ruin her daughter's hearing and moral compass. The song was called "Jesus Freak." And you know that a lot of those kids, as soon as they left the whirling blades of their helicopter parents and went off to college, enjoyed their freedom a little too much.

As Rapunzel grows up, she longs for freedom, to see what is outside her tower, especially the floating lights she sees out her window every year on her birthday. The lights are actually lanterns released by the king and queen to commemorate their stolen baby's birth. But Gothel is adamant that the world is no place for Rapunzel, singing about all the things to be afraid of, like "ruffians, thugs, poison ivy, quicksand, cannibals, snakes, the plague, large bugs, and men with pointy teeth." In other words, the world is a scary place, and we have to do everything we can to protect ourselves, to lock ourselves in a tower, safe and far removed from the evils of the world around us.

I know some Christians who grew up in churches that preached the same message. They preached a gospel of fear, not the freedom found through faith in Christ. They taught people the Bible says things like "God helps those who help themselves," which only exists in the book of 1 Opinions, not in scripture, and used that to justify not reaching out to "the least of these." These churches told people that anyone not like them was dangerous, that the world would seduce them and corrupt them, that they weren't smart enough or strong enough to stay faithful in light of such temptations. Especially if you were a woman.

I remember a guest we had worship with us several years back. She had been a part of this kind of church growing up, and when she got out in the real world and found out that the theology of fear she was taught didn't match up with her actual experience, she left the church, and didn't set foot in one for years until the day she worshipped with us. As she was leaving the sanctuary with tears in her eyes, having heard a gospel of love and welcome and seeing women lead worship, she told me her story and then said, "I didn't know church could be like this!"

Now, it's easy for me to punch down on churches that we consider exclusive, small-minded, not open to the breadth and depth of God's love. "They're so bad!" But I wonder, if we look closely enough, if we all have towers in our faith, places where our theology or understanding of God is locked up, solidified, unchanging. For some people, it relates to how they feel about others, people they feel are outside of God's grace, people not welcomed to the table. But for other people, the thoughts holding them captive are about themselves, that they are not good enough to follow their calls, that they are not worthy of God's grace, that they are not brave enough to leave behind their childhood beliefs to explore a new landscape of faith. They have forgotten their true identity as children of God set free through Christ. I personally know several recovering Southern Baptists and evangelicals who struggle with this.

This is exemplified in the movie when Rapunzel is rescued by the mischievous thief Flynn Ryder. As she descends the tower and touches grass for the first time, she dances for joy, only to recoil because of her guilt for disobeying her supposed mother Gothel. There's a great scene when Rapunzel oscillates between pure exhilaration and paralyzing fear. Is it really OK to go outside your comfort zone, where you may encounter quicksand, large bugs, and men with pointy teeth?

Rapunzel confronts those fears first-hand when Flynn takes her to the Snuggly Duckling, a tavern full of ruffians that Gothel warned her about. At first, she's scared out of her wits, but when she boldly asks, "Has anyone ever had a dream?" the ruffians soften and break into one of the funniest songs in the Disney canon. One thug with a hook for a hand sings about wanting to be a concert pianist, another wants to be a florist and the group sings together, "Bruiser knits, Killer sews, Fang does little puppet shows." Yes, as the main ruffian sings, "Though I do like breaking femurs, you can count me with the dreamers." It's almost Shakespearean!

In this scene, Rapunzel learns such an important lesson: when we are willing to leave the safety of our comfort zones, the things we've been told to fear don't seem all that scary. Most people who are grumpy or mean are actually just hurt or scared. Most bullies make other people feel bad because they don't feel good about themselves. Sometimes all these people need is for someone to be kind to them. I feel like our whole culture is driven by fear today. We're told if we don't isolate ourselves, steer clear of the things that are considered dangerous, we're risking our health, our safety, our lives. And yet I remember a wise man once saying, "Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." Rapunzel discovers that everyone has a story, even those we are told to fear.

I learned this in a class I took a few years ago on the theology of immigration. Some voices in our world today tell us that people trying to cross our borders and come into our country are doing so to bring trouble, to disrupt our way of life, to steal things valuable to us. But what I learned in this class was so many people immigrating to this country aren't running toward something, but away from something. If the only way to escape the war and gang violence and extreme poverty of one's home is to go somewhere else, then the risk is worth the effort. I read several books and first-hand accounts of immigrants that I been told I should fear. Everyone has a story.

That's true of Flynn Ryder, the thief who rescued Rapunzel. His agenda is to steal her crown to make himself rich. But as he and Rapunzel are on the run, in the midst of a watery cave – baptism, anyone? – Flynn Ryder reveals his real name to Rapunzel. He's actually Eugene Fitzherbert. You know, in the Bible, a lot of people get new names. Abram becomes Abraham, Jacob becomes Israel, Simon gets christened Peter. And when we're baptized we are given a new identity as a chosen child of God.

Eugene's desire to get rich takes a backseat to his growing love for Rapunzel, and in an effort to save her from Gothel's grasp, he gets mortally wounded. Rapunzel knows she can save him with her hair, but if she does, Gothel will hold her captive forever. So, as Rapunzel leans over Eugene, ready to heal him, he takes a shard of glass and cuts her magical hair. Eugene dies in Rapunzel's arms. The end.

Just kidding! This is Disney, that would never happen. Rapunzel cries a tear onto Eugene's cheek, and it turns out that her magical healing powers weren't just in her hair but permeated her whole being. Eugene is resurrected, Gothel dies in a fall from the same tower in which she held Rapunzel, and Rapunzel is reunited with her parents.

The story of "Tangled" is the story of what it means to be free from the thoughts, beliefs, behaviors which hold us captive. We are constantly growing and changing, and our understanding of God should change with us. I know a lot of adults whose faith is still stuck in their childhood Sunday School class, which makes them ill-equipped to handle the challenges of our world. They were told to fear people of other faiths or other ethnicities or other sexual orientations, and yet when they work on a Habitat house next to a Muslim or sit next to a gay couple in worship, their whole faith is upended – and that's a really good and scary thing. When we move past the black-and-white thinking we grew up with, we see the world is full of color and complexity, that there is less to fear than we think, that everyone has a story and a dream, if we'll just take the time to ask.

Paul writes, "Do not be conformed to this age," this age which tells us who to fear and who to hate and who should be excluded from God's table. Instead, Paul says, "be transformed by the renewing of your mind." Why? "So that you may discern the will of God." That says to me the more we open our mind, free ourselves, leave our comfort zones to serve God, the more we are able to discern the will of God. I don't pretend to know all of God's will, but the God that I worship wills for us to use our freedom to love, not fear. Who are you afraid of? What group of people do you avoid? I wonder if that would change if you listened to their story.