

At the Movies: 1. Knowing Whose You Are

Scripture: 2 Peter 1:3-11

July 7, 2019

Pastor Steve Richards

Last weekend, my daughter, Lauren, took me to a Minnesota United game at Allianz Field. And the best thing about that, aside from spending time with my daughter and her husband, was that the United won 7-1. She got us seats in the first row right beside the goal – the goal where the United scored 5 of their 7 goals. Each time they scored, we were right there – maybe 6 feet from the goal as if we were actually on the scoring team. We weren't just watching the game, we were part of it. I get a similar feeling when I read a great novel or watch a great movie. They are not just entertaining or even inspiring. They are great because I feel like I'm part of the story. There are scenes that relate directly to me and my life experience. And that's what I hope to capture in this four-part series. Four movies in which I hope you feel a connection – where we will see our human condition and what happens when that intersects with the Gospel.

This morning, we begin with *The Lion King*, a story of something that happens on the inside that changes the entire trajectory of life – but it has to be something worth fighting for. We see this unfold in the life of the central character, a lion named Simba. This story first appeared as a Disney animated movie in 1994, and three years later it debuted as a musical at the Orpheum Theater in downtown Minneapolis before moving to Broadway where you can still see it today. This was the first animated movie by Disney to be an original story and not based on an already existing work. The story takes place in the Pride Lands of the Serengeti where a lion rules over the other animals as king. The writers found their inspiration for this story from the Bible which I think becomes clear in this opening scene from the movie. [*Raffiki blesses Simba and presents him to the heavens and to the animal kingdom*]

This looks a lot like what we know as baptism. Each time a person comes here or an infant is brought here for baptism, we take the water as a sign of life and new birth, and we splash the water on that person's head and then take a drop of oil and anoint that child with the sign of the cross. "You are marked with the sign of the cross and sealed as God's own forever." And though that drop of oil won't last very long, the mark is really deep down inside – sealed as God's own forever – and that mark can never be removed. Forgotten, maybe. Rejected. Ignored. Blocked. Covered. But never removed. In the Bible, Jesus' baptism concludes with the heavens opening, light streaming down and the voice of God saying. "This is my son whom I dearly love. I find happiness in him." That's the moment when we begin to see who Jesus really is. When we are baptized that is a moment of rebirth when we are marked and claimed and given our true identity. "I am a child of God, and God is happy with me." And that identity has the power to change the trajectory of your life.

Simba knows that he will one day be the king – and he can't wait. "I just can't wait to be king," he sings. He tells everyone – and not just that he will be king, but they will not. He takes his identity and uses it as a badge of superiority. But this identity is meant to be something deeper than that. Because if it's not, we become susceptible to all sorts of external forces. A few weeks ago, we looked at the life of Simon Peter. He was the first to be called by Jesus – "Follow me." Simon and his brother Andrew were fishermen at the time and at once they put down their nets and everything else to follow Jesus. Simon is not only the first to be called but appears to become the number one disciple. He is strong physically, bold and determined. His faith set him apart from the others so that Jesus named him Peter, which means the rock. And in Matthew 16, we hear Jesus say, "on this rock I will build my church and the gates of death will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom..." Peter is named and claimed. He inherits

the kingdom! But not so fast, Simon Peter. On his final night, Jesus announces that all of the disciples would fall away. None of them would live up to their name. But Peter says, “Not me, Jesus! You can count on me.” But within hours, Peter denies even knowing Jesus – not once but three times. And when Jesus is crucified, Peter has gone into hiding.

In the Lion King, Simba faces a moment of adversity, allowing himself to be drawn into a place of danger. Take a look. [*Thinking he has more power than he really has, Simba naively wanders into a place a danger*] His father, Mufasa will come to the rescue, but as Simba watches from a place of safety, his father gives his life. And Simba goes into hiding. When have we also done the same? When have we not lived up to our potential – our God-given potential? In our words and in our thoughts – “I just can’t wait to be king” – but in our actions, we hide. Adam and Eve live in paradise and God asks them to abide by one rule – and they can’t abide by that one rule. Cain and Abel, two brothers both loved by God but what happens? Cain kills his brother Abel because he thinks God love his brother more. Or the story of Queen Jezebel. She becomes the queen and then uses her power to destroy people, and in the end she is destroyed by her own self-centeredness. Have we ever put ourselves in the driver’s seat, in the center of our universe, thinking life is all about me?

Years ago, I was asked to write a book. I had served small and large churches and for a time provided leadership for one of the largest children’s ministries in our denomination. As a result I was invited to speak at national conferences and consult on curriculum. But I wanted to write a book. Then one day, I was given that opportunity. The publisher flew me to a writer’s conference where I met with editors to sketch out the book that they wanted. Now I could tell the world what I knew. I came home, put together an outline and sent it to my editor and she sent it back to me saying that was not the book that they wanted. They didn’t want a book about me. So I took two weeks of vacation, I borrowed someone’s cabin, and for two weeks I struggled. What I realized was that I wanted to write a book for me – so I could see my name – so I could say I was the writer. I just could not wait to be king... And whether it is me or you or a lion named Simba or a disciple named Peter, we all struggle with what we want, forgetting that we have been named and claimed by God for a purpose greater than ourselves. In the Lion King, Simba runs so far away that he has forgotten who he is, until the baboon priest, Rafiki tracks him down. [*Rafiki says, “You don’t even know who you are.” Then leads Simba to the water where he sees his reflection, but what Simba does not immediately recognize is that his reflection is really that of his father in him.*]

He lives in you. The father, Musafa who gave his life for his son. Simba is changed by the power of sacrificial love. In this morning’s scripture, we hear from Peter: **The Lord has given us everything we need for life and godliness.** It’s in you. This is not the same Peter who went into hiding afraid for his life. Peter has been changed by the power of God’s love in Jesus, and that inner mark – that inner identity is now who he really is.

From the moment of baptism we are imprinted with an identity and there are forces from outside us and even our own ego that will attempt to hijack that identity and use it for no earthly good. Peter says, **“This is why you must make every effort...”** (fight for it) And then he lists what God has given us: moral excellence, knowledge, self-control, endurance, godliness, affection for others, love. It’s in you, but you’ve got to fight for it.

Last week, I was listening to a podcast by Dr. Tim Elmore and he used the images of a tollbooth and a roadblock. When we come to a tollbooth or a roadblock, we have to stop. In life, we sometimes get stuck along the way, but we get to choose. Is it a tollbooth or a roadblock? If it’s a roadblock, it controls us. There’s no option. We can’t move. But if it’s a tollbooth, we stop and

there may be a price, but we keep moving forward. Whatever you face, choose the tollbooth. I will get through this. I am marked with the cross and sealed as God's own forever. "I am a child of God, and God is happy with me." It's who God says you are – and it's worth fighting for.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of July 7, 2019

Weekly Prayer: Lord, we thank you that you have claimed us and equipped us for life in this world. Even when we stray into places that do not honor you or your will for us, you reach out to us with unbounding grace. Your love empowers us to trust you rather than our circumstances. Thank you for your abundant and generous gifts. May your work in us show the world your greatness. Amen.

Monday, July 8

Scripture: Matthew 3:13-17

At that time Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan River so that John would baptize him. John tried to stop him and said, "I need to be baptized by you, yet you come to me?" Jesus answered, "Allow me to be baptized now. This is necessary to fulfill all righteousness." So John agreed to baptize Jesus. When Jesus was baptized, he immediately came up out of the water. Heaven was opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God coming down like a dove and resting on him. A voice from heaven said, "This is my Son whom I dearly love; I find happiness in him."

Observation: The writers of the screenplay for *The Lion King* credit the Bible as the inspiration for this movie. In the Bible, Jesus, the Messiah, is also called "King" (Matthew 2:2) and "Lion" (Revelation 5:5). In the opening scene of the movie, the new lion prince, named Simba, is consecrated and presented to the community, somewhat like we read in today's scripture. In baptism, Jesus was named and claimed by God. That naming and claiming also happens when we are baptized.

Application: In this opening scene, we also see ourselves. We are born anew with a purpose, an identity, and a destiny. In baptism, we are named and claimed. People were coming to John for baptism as a way of showing their commitment to God's ways. Every time there is a baptism in worship, all who have been baptized are invited to recommit themselves to God. We say these words: "With God's help we will proclaim the good news and live according to the example of Christ."

Prayer: Thank you, God, for giving me life and inviting me into a life-long relationship with you. Help me to live into your hope for me so I will live in ways that honor your name which you have imprinted on my heart. Amen.

Tuesday, July 9

Scripture: Ephesians 6:1-4

As for children, obey your parents in the Lord, because it is right. The commandment *Honor your father and mother* is the first one with a promise attached: *so that things will go well for you, and you will live for a long time in the land*. As for parents, don't provoke your children to anger, but raise them with discipline and instruction about the Lord.

Observation: In the first part of the movie, we see a story of father and son: King Mufasa (voiced by the deep-throated James Earl Jones) and his son, Simba. The father is trying to raise his son in wisdom and leadership, wanting to equip him to one day be able to live into his

destiny. When Mufasa shows Simba the extent of their kingdom, he tells his son explicitly not to go into the elephant graveyard. Of course, Simba disobeys and goes there. What Simba didn't know was that this is where the hyenas lurked. He and his friend get into a mess, and they're almost eaten. Luckily he is rescued by his dad. But then comes "the talk."

Application: How were you shaped? What values and character traits did your others teach you? How did you come to embrace what you value today? If your parents helped you do that, how did they? This movie reminds us that in reality, our kids don't do what we say...they do what we do. They learn from watching us. So, as you're thinking about how you are shaping those that God has given under your influence, think first about what you do. What do they see you doing?

Prayer: I am mindful, O God, that you have been working through others to show me what it means to follow you. And yet I have resisted, stubbornly wanting to direct my own path, even when I knew it would not honor you. Forgive me for those times when I fail to recognize your love for me. Help me to be for others what you have been for me. Amen.

Wednesday, July 10

Scripture: Genesis 49:9-10; Revelation 5:5

Judah is a lion's cub; from the prey, my son, you rise up. He lies down and crouches like a lion; like a lioness—who dares disturb him? The scepter won't depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from among his banners. Gifts will be brought to him; people will obey him.

Then one of the elders said to me, "Don't weep. Look! The Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has emerged victorious so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals."

Observation: The "Lion King" is a biblical idea. In the Bible, the promised messiah-king is called a lion. When Jacob was nearing death, he called for his 12 sons and proclaimed a blessing over each of them. He gave them each a word, a description, an identity. These were God-inspired blessings which eventually came true. When Jacob got to his fourth son, Judah, he gave a blessing that seemed to be fulfilled hundreds of years later when David became king. David, from the tribe of Judah, was the greatest king the Hebrews ever knew. But instead, David is promised a descendant who would be even greater (2 Samuel 7:12-16). In Revelation, we are told that Jesus is the foretold Lion of the tribe of Judah, a descendant of King David, and even greater king than he.

Application: So what message can we find in this? That God's promises are trustworthy? That God's timing can stretch for generations until a promise is ultimately fulfilled? And somehow each of us is one part of God's way of working out God's purpose in this world. Ultimately, Jesus is the victorious Lion King!

Prayer: I want to follow you, Lord, knowing that your will and ways will be fulfilled. Let me be for you what you want for the world. Let your grace and love be seen in my words and acts this day. Amen.

Thursday, July 11

Scripture: 1 Peter 5:6-11

Therefore, humble yourselves under God's power so that he may raise you up in the last day. Throw all your anxiety onto him, because he cares about you. Be clearheaded. Keep alert. Your accuser, the devil, is on the prowl like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith. Do so in the knowledge that your fellow believers are enduring the same suffering throughout the world. After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, the one who called you into his eternal glory in Christ Jesus, will himself restore, empower, strengthen, and establish you. To him be power forever and always. Amen.

Observation: In *The Lion King*, Scar represents the dark side. He is Mufasa's brother, and he wants to become king. He devises a plot to kill both Simba and Mufasa. Scar seems to also represent the dark side in each of us: jealousy, coveting, power, control, status. We are supposed to be scared of Scar, partly because we also see him in ourselves. The Bible calls this our sin nature. We are, deep down, selfish. We are each drawn to it, and it is scary, because being selfish draws us to those things that hurt not only ourselves but even those we love.

Application: It makes no sense. But, it's true, you stop thinking when you are drawn to sin. Making sense doesn't matter anymore. Sin has an appetite all its own. We read about this today in senseless acts of violence that accomplish no earthly purpose and yet continue. How have you seen this in your own life? God offers another way!

Prayer: Forgive me, Lord, when I am drawn to desires that do not honor you. Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be holy and honorable this day. Amen.

Friday, July 12

Scripture: Luke 15:11-14

Jesus said, "A certain man had two sons. The younger son said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the inheritance.' Then the father divided his estate between them. Soon afterward, the younger son gathered everything together and took a trip to a land far away. There, he wasted his wealth through extravagant living. When he had used up his resources, a severe food shortage arose in that country and he began to be in need."

Observation: Out in the wilderness, Simba is adopted by two care-free critters, a meerkat named Timone, and a warthog named Pumba. They teach Simba that the way to survive is to simply forget all that is past. Live in the present, and don't care about anything. Their catchphrase: Hakuna matata. It means "no worries." And so Simba forgets where he came from, who he was, and all his family and responsibilities back home. He deals with his guilt by not worrying about it. This is the phrase that the Prodigal Son lived by in Jesus' story. He simply forgot about all his past.

Application: But eventually, the emptiness inside becomes too much to ignore. Same with the movie. The family back home are living in despair, and one of them discovers Simba by accident and reaches out to him for help. His past caught up with him. Now, Simba has a choice to make. Have you experienced a time when you felt completely empty – a time when everything you tried could not fill the emptiness inside? Are you there now? As with Simba and even the prodigal, you have a choice to make. The prodigal "came to his senses," "got up and went to his father" (Luke 15:17, 20).

Prayer: Help me, O God, to hear again your unfailing love for me. Draw me close. Let me see me right where I am and also how you see me – a beloved child who you will always welcome home. Amen.

Saturday, July 13

Scripture: Revelation 7:16-17

They won't hunger or thirst anymore. No sun or scorching heat will beat down on them, because the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will shepherd them. He will lead them to the springs of life-giving water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

Observation: We are like Simba. We forget who we are. We may even reject who we are. We live in the moment, hoping to forget all that guilt has piled up on us. But the emptiness inside becomes too much. You are God's child. God has a claim on you. Even if you ignore or reject it, God has a purpose and destiny for you. You will only be whole if you live into it. Running away can be so painful. It can be so empty. Hukuna matata only works for a while. Remember that you are a child of God! You are called for a purpose. There is a greater plan for your life. Remember who you are! And keep remembering.

Application: The words from Revelation remind us that God's covenant will be fulfilled. Only God can provide what we so often attempt to find in other places and in other ways. As we read on Monday, at baptism, Jesus was identified as a beloved child of God. That same identity is yours. Every time you shower, every time you bathe, remember that you are baptized. You are a child of God. You have a greater identity!

Prayer: Thank you, God, for the greatness of your love and your readiness to always receive me. Help me to hear again that I am your child whom you love. Amen.