

## **The Gospel according to Disney: When Dreams Come True**

August 22, 2021

Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

### **Revelation 21:1-5**

Alrighty, friends, today we are coming to the end of our fun little lighthearted series titled “The Gospel according to Disney,” where we have been exploring some of the key, central, pivotal themes of faith and spirituality, but doing so in a kind-of playful way, coming at these themes through the lens of Disney animated movies.

Up until this point we have been exploring “newer” Disney movies – and by newer, I mean, movies made within my lifetime – not all of them have been exactly new. We started with *The Lion King* and explored the themes of baptism and identity. Who are we, as people of God? Who does God say we are? And then we were challenged, along with the runaway lion Simba to “Remember who you are” – to become the people God created us to be and to take our place within the body of Christ, within the kingdom of God.

Then we jumped into a newer movie, *Moana* – the story of a teenage girl who left her island to travel across the vast ocean to restore the heart of Te Fiti, and in the process dealing with some of the very same questions dealt with in *The Lion King* – the question of who am I and what am I called to do – but also navigating the question of “who am I *really*, when life goes sour and I begin to act like someone I’m not?” Is that image of God still written on my soul, when I royally mess up? When, along with the disciple Peter I deny ever having known Jesus? And the answer, of course, is yes.

And then we stepped back in time again to another movie of my childhood, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. The story of the misshapen, disfigured bell ringer Quasimodo, the beautiful and scandalous gypsy girl Esmerelda, and the uppity, uptight judge Frolo. And we asked the question “who is the monster and who is the man?” Or, in the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector, “who walked away redeemed?” Was it the self-righteous religious leader who thought he was doing everything right, or was it the self-proclaimed sinner – the broken and messy person – who fell down on his face before God in repentance? And as we see, God is all about loving the messy people.

Then last week Kendal brought us back into another newer movie – this one done by Pixar Animation Studios – titled *Inside Out*, the story of a 12-year-old girl named Riley whose inner world gets shaken when her family moves her across the country and she has to leave behind everything she knew. And all of the feelings inside of her go haywire when two of those feelings – joy and sadness – get lost in the recesses of her mind. And what we come to understand in this movie is that there is a place in life for *all* of our emotions, even the seemingly “negative” emotions like sadness, and anger, and disgust, and fear – the emotions that sometimes as Christians we try to keep pushed down underneath the surface because on some level we believe that we are supposed to be

“joyful” or “happy” all the time. Yet the truth is, we can’t ever truly have joy *without* sadness. We can’t have Easter without Good Friday. And God created *all* of our emotions and made a place for all of them – and therefore, we can express them all to God and be faithful in doing so.

So, today we are taking a *big* step back in time and exploring an early Disney movie. In fact, of all of the movies we have looked at, this is the only one that was made by Walt Disney himself – created during Walt Disney’s life. And it is quintessential *Disney*. When we think of Disney princesses, Cinderella is likely one of the first ones who comes to mind. When we think of the big, beautiful Disney castle – it is the castle from Cinderella. When we think of the phrase “happily ever after” – that’s a Cinderella phrase.

Walt Disney himself said that Cinderella was his favorite princess. The movie was released in 1950, and was the second Disney princess movie, after Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. It was an immediate box office hit, which was really lucky for Walt Disney because the previous three movies, released during World War II, did not do well at all. Pinocchio, Fantasia, and Dumbo – all three of which we still look at today as favorite classic movies – they basically flopped right off the bat. But with the release and immediate success of Cinderella, the movie studio was basically saved from financial disaster.

So, Cinderella was not the first Disney movie released, but it was the first one that Walt Disney started working on. While the movie came out in 1950, Disney actually released an earlier version of the same story back in 1922 – an old silent one-reel cartoon – which he later re-made into the movie that we know and love today. So we can actually legitimately say that the Cinderella story is where it all began, almost 100 years ago.

I am not going to spend a lot of time re-telling the story today, because unless you have been living under a rock for your entire life, you know the story. It has been re-made and re-mastered, and re-told countless times. It’s the classic rags to riches story, based on one of Grimm’s Fairy Tales. A young woman named Ella loses both of her parents and grows up with her evil stepmother and stepsisters. Her family never treats her like family, but instead forces her to work as a servant girl in their home, which is how she gets the nickname “Cinderella” – she is constantly covered with soot from cleaning out the cinders from the fireplace.

So one day, the prince throws a big, fancy ball, and Cinderella’s stepsisters are all excited to go. They are hopeful that the prince will notice them and choose one of them as his bride. Cinderella wants to go to the ball too, but her stepmother won’t let her. And besides, she has nothing to wear.

But lo and behold, on the night of the ball, Cinderella’s fairy godmother shows up and transforms her rags into a stunning ballgown, a pumpkin into a carriage, and the fieldmice into horses. She sends her ahead to the ball, warning her that at the stroke of

midnight the magic spell will wear off and she will once again be clothed in rags. But for these few hours she can play the part of a princess.

So Cinderella goes to the ball, meets the prince, the two of them fall head-over-heels in love at first sight, and all is well...until Cinderella hears the clock striking midnight. She runs away, leaving behind a glass slipper on the steps of the palace which – somehow, miraculously, doesn't transform, but stays a glass slipper. The prince, who is now infatuated with Cinderella, launches an all-out hunt for the owner of the glass slipper, and finally finds Cinderella, hidden away by her stepmother and stepsisters. The prince marries her, and the two of them live happily ever after.

I have to say, I actually didn't watch Cinderella all that much when I was a kid – my mom *hated* Cinderella. The themes of love at first sight, and happily ever after – the idea that all a person's troubles would just magically disappear if a handsome prince should happen to come along – those were themes that my mom had no desire whatsoever for her daughters to internalize. I was raised with more of a Moana ethic: grab the ocean by the horns and don't rely on a prince or a demi-god or anyone else to do what you can figure out how to do yourself. And get creative, if necessary.

And so, I have to admit that when I think of the Cinderella story, I can't help but to be a little bit cynical. Because my mom was right – love at first sight and happily ever afters are not impossible, but they are rare. They are a thing of fairy tales. Life is harder than that. Love is harder than that. As anyone who has ever been in a committed relationship knows, some days love is a conscious choice we have to make – it is not always something that just happens. And happily ever afters? Well, as we saw last week in *Inside Out*, we can live happily and joyfully, for the better part of our lives, but to live more than about 5 minutes also means that we will inevitably also come face-to-face with sin, and brokenness, and pain, and suffering. Sadness is a necessary part of our lives, too.

However, there is something that I do really love about Cinderella, and Snow White, and Sleeping Beauty, and Beauty and the Beast, and The Little Mermaid, and Aladdin, and The Hunchback, and The Lion King, and Moana – all of these “happily ever after” Disney stories. And that is the theme of hope in the face of adversity.

Throughout the story of Cinderella, we see a young woman who has lived a hard, painful life. A life that has been marked with deep and profound loss, followed by her being stripped of her very identity; her personhood; her own agency. She was never allowed to make her own decisions; to chart her own course in life; to go where she wanted or do what she wanted. She was totally and completely at the mercy of the people who hated her the most. And yet, where any other person might have allowed themselves to become hardened and Jaded – to become, like Te Fiti in Moana, a monster, lashing out and destroying everything in her wake – there was one thing that Cinderella held onto, that got her through: hope.

She *knew* that this was not who she was, and that this was not all that life had to offer. She knew and trusted, even with all evidence pointed to the contrary, that there was something bigger out there for her. If only she would keep her eyes open and wait patiently.

In some ways, maybe it seems a little bit counterintuitive to pair the story of Cinderella (a story of unbridled optimism) with a scripture reading from the book of Revelation (that contains, among other things, the four horsemen of the apocalypse). But in truth, when the book of Revelation was written, the people were not all that different from Cinderella.

Revelation was written probably sometime during the first century A.D., during or around the reign of the Roman Emperor Nero.

Nero was a royal piece of work. He made Cinderella's evil stepmother look like Mother Teresa. He was all about extravagance and luxury; about putting on an impressive show. But nevertheless, the majority of the Roman people rightly saw him as compulsive and corrupt. One day, he decided that he wanted to clear some land to expand the size of his palace complex, and to do that, the story goes that he set the city of Rome on fire – to clear the space that he felt he needed – but then, because he never took responsibility for anything, he blamed the Christians for setting the fire, and used that as an excuse to begin rounding up Christians and putting them to death – having them burned alive.

So, living as a Christian in and around Rome during the first century was incredibly dangerous. And through no fault of their own, members of the Christian community were basically driven underground for a long, long time, stripped of their lives and their identity, their very personhood. And the book of Revelation is a long, somewhat cryptic and difficult to understand book written during this season that explores what it means to live as a community of faith in the face of what feels at the time to be the end of the world.

And what kept them going – what gave them hope – was a simple and yet profound promise: “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away.” In other words: “This is not the end. This is not all there is. Nero does not get the last word, just like king Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon did not get the last word. And the ancient Pharaoh of Egypt did not get the last word. The last word? That belongs to God, and God alone. And God has a plan beyond this struggle that you are living right now.”

My friends, it is sometimes so easy in this life to grow cynical, and to come to believe that “happily ever after” is *only* an ending for fairy tales. But the truth is, “happily ever after” isn't just a Disney trope. It is the hope that we live by. The hope that when this life feels like too much to bear, when the bad news in the news is overwhelming; when our lives take dark and painful turns; when we feel all topsy-turvy and upside-down, we

have a God who promises us that beyond the struggles of this life we are children of a king. When we feel like life has covered us with soot and cinders and we don't know who we are anymore, the truth that we can't always see is that we are, in fact, members of the kingdom of God. And there is a glass slipper that fits our foot, telling us that we belong. And this kingdom, though we may not see it now, is truly one big "happily ever after" – a place where dreams come true.

So my friends, may we face the struggles of today, knowing that we have hope for tomorrow. May we walk through the joys and the sorrows of life, trusting that we have a God who wipes our tears away, and that we are bound for a kingdom in which there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain – for the things of old have passed away and everything will be made new. Forever and ever and ever. Happily ever after. The end.