

The Lion King, Colossians, and the Circle of Life

A sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
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Colossians 1:1-14

Today our summer sermon series on Faith and Films continues with a look at the animated movie *The Lion King*, which then became a Broadway musical and will be being released as a live action film later this week. We'll be looking at a few of the lessons of *The Lion King* through the prism of the opening fourteen of Paul's letter to the Colossians, which happens to be the lectionary reading assigned for this day.

As you hear and reflect on Paul's words to the early Christians at Colossae, think about them in the context of the great circle of life. Hear them as the prayer of an elder in the faith for those who are younger. When Paul speaks about the love his hearers have for all the saints, he is speaking of their love not for particularly devout and revered believers who have gone on to glory (which is one definition of a saint), but of their love for the whole gathered community of faith. Notice how Paul talks about hope, leading lives worthy of the Lord, growing in the knowledge of God, and being rescued from the power of darkness.

*Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,
To the saints and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ in Colossae:
Grace to you and peace from God our Father.*

In our prayers for you we always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. You have heard of this hope before in the word of the truth, the gospel that has come to you. Just as it is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world, so it has been bearing fruit among yourselves from the day you heard it and truly comprehended the grace of God. This you learned from Epaphras, our beloved fellow-servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf, and he has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

For this reason, since the day we heard it, we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God. May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

One of the true privileges of being a pastor is that those of us who serve in that capacity regularly get a front row seat to the unfolding Circle of Life, with all of its joy and heartache, with all of its wonders and its worries. A child is born, and often we are invited to come to the hospital to hold them and give our blessing to the baby and the baby's parents. Several months later, the baptism day comes along. The parents and congregation makes their promises, we splash the water on the baby's head, and we hold the child up and say, "*See what Love the Father has given us that we should be called the children of God!*"

We watch the children come up front for Moment for Young Disciples, see them learn the stories of the Bible and take on projects to help those in need. We greet them at the door after coffee hour. An instant later, it seems they are being confirmed. A minute after that, we are hearing senior sermons and celebrating graduation from high school and maybe writing in their *Oh The Places You'll Go* book.

Then, perhaps, there are the weddings where we stand before a couple and speak about the work that love entails and they repeat the vows slowly after us. *I Brian take you Christian....* The circle continues, as couples begin to care for the next generation themselves.

There are the other parts of the circle, too. Like watching people of all ages step into what it means to serve and care for others and where that takes them, whether off on a mission trip to Honduras or into a vocation, whether into a particular project or group at the church or into a volunteering or advocacy role in the community. Like looking on as they gain new insights and deeper confidence in their work and worth as children of God trying to make a difference for the kingdom in the world. Such things are a privilege for a pastor to see.

Then there are the tears.

Sometimes we're present at the bedside at the end of a person's days to pray as their life ebbs out or right after a person has breathed their last. We're there for the memorial service or the funeral where we tell stories and celebrate the promise that love is in fact, indeed, stronger than death.

There are the times where the death or the loss seems the more tragic because it comes too soon. The illness moves too fast, the person was too young.

There are the triumphs and the disappointments, the reconciliations and the divorces. The messy stuff of life.

It's all a part of the circle.

And while pastors maybe get a front row seat, people who are really involved in a community of faith get to watch it play out, too. We all get to **be there for each other** in the joys and sorrows. That's what it means to be part of the priesthood of **all** believers.

Whatever else *The Lion King* is about—and if you read the piece in *The Washington Post* this week about the unfortunate messages it communicates about the weak bowing to the strong and the way certain segments of human society get marginalized, you know that it is not without its complications—but whatever else *The Lion King* is about, it is about The Circle of Life, right?

It begins with the wise old Baboon Raffiki, in a clear allusion to baptism, holding Simba up to the sky on Pride Rock. A new heir has been born and the animal community rejoices. Mufasa, his father, beams with pride. Scar, his uncle, fumes that an heir has been born who will threaten his accession to the throne.

So Scar hatches a plan. He sets up a situation to place young Simba in peril, knowing that Mufasa will try to save him, which Scar hopes will lead to both of them perishing. In the effort to rescue his son, Mufasa is trampled to death, but Simba somehow escapes harm.

Scar becomes the new king. Simba goes into an exile in the wilderness where he befriends Pumbaa the Warthog and Timon the Meerkat. They become his partners in a carefree, *Akuna Matata, No Worries* kind of life. But there is a problem. The problem is, Simba is not into who he is meant to be.

Sometime later, Rafiki, who is like a priest figure, comes up to Simba and indicates that he is someone from his past, someone who knows his father, Mufasa. 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. I love it when priests dance. “*Nope, wrong again. He’s alive. I’ll show him to you. You follow old Rafiki, he knows the way, come on...*”

Simba chases after the priest figure until they come to a pool in a clearing. Rafiki tells him, “*There he is. Down there.*” Simba looks in the pool. “*That’s not my father, that’s just my reflection.*” The wise old baboon says, “*No. Look again.*”

Simba looks more closely and the reflection begins to morph more and more into the image of his father. That’s when Rafiki tells him, “*You see, he lives in you.*” Then Mufasa, who is the God figure—so he has to be 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.*”

Now on one level that’s a story about a prince in exile realizing that he was born to be a king and that he should return to claim the throne that is rightfully his because of the circumstances of his birth. He should return to that throne to be a benevolent dictator and they can return to a society where it was clear who was on the inside and who was on the outside. That’s one way to read it that story.

You can also read it as a repetition of the Moses narrative, where Moses, who is out in the wilderness of Midian, fleeing from who he is, is reminded that he has work to do. Though Moses objects to it, God through the burning bush keeps calling him back to doing what he was born to do.

The story of *The Lion King* could be about a prince in exile. It could be about Moses.

But I see it on a different level. I see it as a baptismal metaphor, a metaphor that works for all of us, if we keep in mind that remembering who we in light of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is not a claim to privilege, but a call to surrender and service. It’s not a claim to exclusivity, but a summons to love and connection, especially to those who are most likely to be placed on the outside of the circle.

This is the way Jesus lived. This is what he taught when he responded to the man who, when Jesus told him to love God and love neighbor, asked, “*And who is my neighbor?*” Jesus told the man a story about a Good Samaritan—a Samaritan, who unlike the good religious priest and the good religious Levite, stopped to help a human being in need. As Martin Luther King, Jr. pointed out, *the*

Samaritan's question was not, If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me? His question was, If I don't stop to help this man, what will happen to him?

Remembering who we are as baptized believers means taking a good look at our reflection and remembering that we are children of God and that the Love embodied in Christ lives deep in us, and that we are called to live like that. We are called to be instruments of God's love and compassion in the world in all sorts of circumstances.

Remembering who we are means remembering that everyone we meet is a child of God as well.

Which means that remembering who we are means keeping in mind the truth that much of what is wrong in the world is bound up in thinking that some lives matter more than others.

And remembering who we are means remembering that we are beloved and have a place on the unwinding path of life, even when events in our lives or our society don't go according to our plan.

This, of course, is the problem, right? It's the perennial problem. We have a certain idea of how life is meant to unfold, and life doesn't always unfold that way.

You cannot be a pastor—you cannot be a vitally involved member of a community of faith—for very long without coming up against the truth that the Circle of Life sometimes moves through despair, disappointment, and death as well as faith and hope and love.

I discovered that in my first congregation in upstate New York. It was a tiny little church on the wrong side of the tracks in West Glens Falls, NY. The two most painful deaths that community of faith and I had to navigate were first, the sudden death of our 49 year old clerk of Session (a wonderful, warm and caring person who died in her sleep, leaving behind a young adult adopted son and a husband who could not read). And second, the death of a 33 year old single mother of two elementary school aged children, whose brother had been killed eight years earlier in the bombing of Pan Am flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland. When things like that happen, any illusions that you have about life being fair go out the window and any words about why bad things happen to good people ring hollow.

There aren't any really good, or deeply satisfying answers. I am sorry if you look to me to provide those answers. There aren't any good and satisfying answers to such questions. All we have in such moments is the call to live fully and lovingly in the present moment and the promise of God that this life is not all there is, the promise that somehow in a way that can't fully understand but only **trust** on this side of the Jordan, this side of death, the circle of life will continue on in a new way not just for us, but for those who have died. Our bodies die, but our souls do not.

That, too, is part of what it means to remember who we are in the midst of the circle of life.

When I read the text from the letter to the Colossians in preparation for the sermon this week, I couldn't help but picture the Apostle Paul as the old baboon Raffiki. I even heard it in his African accent, which I am going to do you a favor and not try to emulate.

All through those first fourteen verses, I heard Paul saying, "Remember who you are. Remember the hope laid up for you in heaven. Remember how the gospel that God's love is stronger than death has been bearing fruit among you ever since you first comprehended the grace of God. Remember who you are—and who God is—so that you will lead lives worthy of God and bear fruit

in every good work. Remember who you are and I will pray that you have strength and the ability to endure with patience what is before you.”

Remember who you are I heard Paul say again and again even though he never used those words.

I think Paul and Raffiki get it.

The circle of life moves us all through despair and hope through faith and love until we find our place in the path unwinding.

On Monday I spent time with Mark and Susie Fowler and the girls at their house. We gathered around Susie and prayed together. Eric joined us by speaker phone. Judith was there with me.

I got home and I'd been digging through some old files. I came upon one with some cards that had been sent to me by people in the church after funerals and baptisms and so forth. I thought, I can't throw these away. One of them was from just a few years ago.

The note came to me on the heels of a baptism. The young woman, whose son I had baptized, wrote, among other things, thank you very much for making the baptism service so special.

The text for that day was the story of Paul and his conversion. After Paul (who at the point is still called Saul) gets knocked off his donkey, blinded by the light, on his way to Damascus, he continues on to the city. There's a fellow there who helps him. A man named Ananias. Ananias stays with him until he starts to see.

At the end of the sermon on that baptism day, I had promised that little boy that I would be his Ananias. His mom thanked me for that in that note.

That's a job we all get to do. In the midst of the circle of life, we all get to help each other see. What we see, when we see clearly and look deeply, is not only our own reflection, but the reflection of the one who calls us to love and serve.

Thank you, as always, Immanuel, for helping me remember who I am. Remember who you are. We'll remember together in the midst of the circle of life. In Jesus' name. Amen.