

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. ²And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became bright as light. ³Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. ⁴Then Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will set up three tents here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” ⁵While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” ⁶When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. ⁷But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.” ⁸And when they raised their eyes, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

⁹As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, “Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”

This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

It’s been a while since I’ve referenced a Disney movie in a sermon. I’m not going to assume that you all will understand this reference, but I want to talk about Moana today. Moana came out in 2016, the year my Sara was born. The soundtrack, written by Lin-Manuel Miranda, was often on when I picked her up from daycare when she was a toddler. It was the first Disney movie she was addicted to. She had the blanket and the backpack and the shoes. And I loved the message.

I loved that the Polynesian girl was to be the next chief of her village. I loved that her grandmother identified as the village “Crazy Lady.” I loved the tension between what she felt called to do and what her parents expected of her.

And then, one day, when I was reading the story of the transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain, I realized, someone at Disney had read it, too, because Moana and Jesus have almost identical moments in their storylines!

Now, in order to explain this, you have to understand that the storyline of Moana revolves around two things – a quest to restore the “heart” of Te Fiti, and an even more important need for Moana to discover who she is. In the movie, the child grows up feeling pulled to go into the unknown, on a journey beyond the reef that surrounds her island. She knows that it is a unique call, a dangerous one, one that her parents scorn because of the danger. With the intention to protect his people, her father has hidden away their past, but her grandmother helps her discover the secret - her ancestors were voyagers, and she sings to Moana that the voice inside of her that calls her to follow her destiny is not wrong. Her grandma says, “You are the one who is chosen to restore the heart that will heal the world. And then, she says, when you find Maui, you say to him, “I am Moana of Motunui.”

There are deep lyrics, deep wisdom, and Moana receives it just as she launches into her epic adventure. She repeats her grandmother’s words like a mantra. “I am Moana of Motunui. I am Moana of Motunui.” It gives her strength and confidence. She is beginning to understand who she is.

In the same way, Jesus grew up as a child with a calling, and I imagine he felt the pull from an early age. I read that Mary and Joseph tried to shield him from dangers as a toddler, kept him away from the dangers of Rome and Jerusalem. I read that Jesus as a child stressed his parents out when he was separated from them in Jerusalem, but he was already revealing his uniqueness when he was found to be in deep conversation with the priests at the temple. He was destined to be the Messiah, but what would that mean? Who would he be?

And as a young man, he knew that he needed to go on a journey into the unknown and restore the heart of the world, like Moana. He believed this, but there were still so many questions and worries. But as he rose from the waters of baptism, a voice said to him, “Jesus, you are my beloved. You make me proud. You have a special calling on your life.”

Those moments of affirmation, love, and pride gave them their identity. They were old enough to adventure on their own, but from that moment, they had new confidence and purpose. A loving figure had given them meaning by naming them and claiming love over them.

And then, they face storms, challenges, and trials. Jesus walks on water. Moana's boat capsizes in water. Jesus adds companions. Moana does, too. Along the way, both face questions about what it means to be "the chosen one." They face doubters who don't believe in them, but they persevere and prove themselves to be brave and wise and loyal along the way.

But then, in all good stories, there is a moment, before the final battle - a moment in which the hero is doubting themselves, the enemy seems too strong, fear is undeniable, and the heroes of the story need a pep talk just before it commences.

In the Disney movie, Moana and her friend Maui have seen the enemy and have been humbled. Maui abandons Moana, denying that she is the chosen one, and claiming that she will get them both killed. She is ready to give up. Tearfully, she tells the ocean that she cannot fulfill the mission. The ocean must choose someone else. She just wants to go home.

In the gospel, Jesus enters Jerusalem, his friends abandon him, deny him, and he asks God to take this cup away. He wants to go home, too.

But, there's also this scene in Matthew 17 - the story of the transfiguration. Jesus is still outside the capital here, but he's heading in that direction, and he's already telling his disciples what will happen. He knows what awaits, and he goes up the mountain to pray. I wonder if he is feeling the same feelings Moana felt. Doubt, fear, isolation, frustration.

In the movie, the spirit of her grandmother appears in that moment of hopelessness. She is bright and glowing. Her grandmother consoles her and says, "It's not your fault. I never should have put so much on your shoulders. If you are ready to go home, I will be with you."

In Matthew, Moses and Elijah appear, bright and glowing. We don't know what they say, but I can imagine them encouraging Jesus and acknowledging how difficult his mission is. Jesus is validated on the mountain. He, too, shines like the sun. His divine nature is on full display. And a voice from heaven says again, "You are my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased." I think that's just what Jesus needed.

Because, I believe, as mature and confident and wise as Jesus was, that he needed a pep talk on the mountaintop. For three years he had been performing miracles and teaching and traveling and while many had come to believe, there was still such skepticism and doubt. His own disciples didn't get it. They were bickering with each other about who was greatest among them and asking him to reexplain parables.

And ultimately, they would abandon him, and he'd have to face the cross alone. Even someone who is fully divine and fully human can hesitate about walking into the face of torture and death. But I think on the mountaintop he became resolved to carry the mission through.

Just like, on the boat, Moana makes a choice to carry on, by herself, toward Te Kā, the lava monster; and in loving pride, the spirit of her grandma repeats the words spoken over her at the beginning. "I know a girl from the island. She stands apart from the crowd. She loves the sea and her people. She makes her whole family proud. Sometimes the world seems against you. The journey may leave a scar, but scars can heal and reveal just who you are."

Do you hear that language? Does it not sound familiar to you? And from there, Moana picks up the song and sings of her own identity. "I am the daughter of the village chief. I've delivered us to where we are. I have journeyed farther. I am everything I've learned and more. Still, it calls me. And the call isn't out there at all. It's inside me. I will carry you here in my heart. You'll remind me. That come what may, I know the way. I am Moana!

Come what may, I know the way.

And that confidence in her identity, that pep talk, where she hears what she has already heard before, but has doubted, gives her the courage to journey toward her biggest fear, the most perilous danger, and ultimately, she faces death itself, approaches it confidently and sacrificially, to restore the heart and heal the world.

Now, thank you for letting me indulge that Disney/Gospel analogy. It may be obvious to you that I've seen the movie at least 75 times and have thought about it a lot, but there's also some personal application here. You see, I think it's vitally important for us to have these moments ourselves. To be baptized and hear the voice of God and a minister and a congregation say, "you are a beloved child of God!" I believe that as children and as youth and as young adults, we have got to find moments to climb a mountain literal or symbolic mountain and hear God say, "You are my beloved child! With you I am well pleased!"

I think we need to have pep talks when we're feeling apprehensive, when we're doubting our worth. We need to, like Moana, repeat out identity like a mantra, "I am a beloved child of God." "You are a beloved child of God." That's what brings the courage. That's what brings the strength and resolve. When you find out who you are, when you claim your identity, you find what you need.

Our value is not based on accomplishments. It's not based on wit and wisdom. It's not about a bank account or our family tree. It's based on a relationship. You belong to God. God claims you and calls you beloved and says I am well pleased with you. That's the foundation you build everything else on.

You feel scared? Claim your identity. You think God made a mistake in asking you to do this thing? Remember that God has been watching you all along and knows that even though the task is heavy, you are capable. And like the grandma, we have this promise that regardless of whether you choose to move on or not, God will be with you, but God did not make a mistake choosing you. You are exactly the right person for this moment. And the voice inside of you will keep reminding you that God is pleased with you, loves you, and believes in you.

We baptized Isla and Jackson today and as the water was poured on their heads, we named them as beloved children of God. It is the core of their identity. It is the truth they can build on, but it is not the last time they need to hear us say it. They need mountaintop moments where the voice echoes over and over again, as many times as they need to hear it, "You are God's beloved. With you God is well pleased."

That can and should be the most important words they, we, I need to hear. At the beginning, at the end, and all through the journey. Amen.