

# St James United Church

Message for May 21, 2023

Ascension Sunday/Seventh Sunday of Easter

"Restoring the Pride Lands"

- Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: John 17:1-11; Acts 1:6-14; "Ascension Day" by Malcolm Guite



Do you remember *The Lion King*? It was first an animated Disney film that came out in the 1990's and then turned into a pretty innovative Broadway musical using a form of puppets, if you could call them that, and most recently was remade into a "live action" movie using CGI. On the off chance you are unfamiliar, it is about a lion cub named Simba. His father Mufasa is the beloved king of the Pride Lands, but he is killed by the machinations of his brother and Simba's uncle, Scar. Now Scar tricks Simba into thinking he caused his father's death and so also into fleeing the kingdom so Scar can become king. This is disastrous for the Pride Lands because Scar is working with the hyenas and their actions throw off the delicate balance of life and the once lush place turns into a wasteland.

By now you're wondering what this has to do with our readings, be it Jesus returning to God, or him praying for his disciples on the night before his arrest and subsequent death. Surprisingly, a lot. The core of *The Lion King* story is Simba's grief at Mufasa's death. He pushes it away with the help of Pumba and Timon who rescue him, but their "no worries" philosophy just helps him avoid taking up his calling as his dad's successor. In the first part of our reading from Acts, the disciples seem a bit like Simba. Their beloved friend and, dare I say, father has died. They have experienced forty days of resurrection appearances but that is to prepare them for his inevitable departure. In Acts, as the disciples look up at the clouds, they seem stuck in their grief, feeling abandoned, and perhaps also stuck in their guilt, knowing they abandoned Jesus in his time of greatest need. It takes the prompting of angels for them to return to Jerusalem to take on their task of spreading Jesus' message and even then they wait in the upper room.

I wonder if at times as a church we're like Simba, and the disciples, unsure of what we are to do next, what our purpose is. We heard from Jesus that we are to carry on in his name, to spread his teaching about God's Reign, and we did that in the past in a way that we knew how to do, but we aren't as sure how to do that anymore in a time of rapid change with religion no longer having an important a role in society. We see this here as in other churches across denominations. The pews aren't full as they were, and younger generations are noticeably absent. Many of us are grieving. It is tempting to look up at the sky to where Jesus had once been, rather than to look to the future as we trust his commissioning for us to be his witnesses in St. John's and to the ends of the earth.

But he has done just that. And he is praying for us as surely as he prayed for his disciples on the night of his arrest, especially as we engage in our MAP process and discern our priorities

as a congregation. He prayed they would have strength and protection as they continued what he started. We need this too because it's easy to get discouraged. But he also prayed that they would experience the eternal life he came to give. Now as much as we associate those words with our eventual death, that's not what he meant. He was speaking of their relationship with God and their relationship with him. Repeatedly in John 17, he prayed about their knowledge. He didn't mean a knowing of the mind like I need to profess belief in him to go to heaven, but of the heart so I can experience heaven right now, namely experience God right now. This brings us back to *The Lion King*. Rafiki, the shaman who blessed Simba when he was born, tells a now adult Simba that he knows where his father is, and tells him to look into the pool of water. Simba protests that it's just his reflection, but Rafiki helps him to see past that, to see what they sing in the Broadway show, that "He lives in you, he lives in me, he watches over everything we see." That is the eternal life Jesus prays that we experience, God in us, Christ in us too, us sharing with them the same unity that they share.

And that has a transformative impact in our lives if we're open to it. That was the case for Simba because he couldn't draw on his father's help without confronting his grief, as well as his guilt. We are to do the same. We often see religion as us trying to be holy, and sin as something to get rid of. But this isn't possible. Jesus didn't judge those who sinned, demanding they be pure and so guilt-free. He loved them and he invited them to learn from their failings. He showed this profoundly on the cross as he forgave his executioners. He brings sin and salvation together and holds them in himself. That is where healing happens, as we accept the earthly and recognize that it is holy, we're holy even when we "sin". This is a core truth of the ascension, as Malcolm Guite writes: "We saw his light break through the cloud of glory / Whilst we were rooted still in time and place. / As earth became a part of Heaven's story / And heaven opened to his human face." The union of heaven and earth heal our hearts as the Christ within us brings our griefs and guilts, our hopes and prayers, into "the heart of things". Perhaps this is what we need to focus on as church, to seek healing, and in the process to create spaces where others feel accepted rather than judged.

But there is one more thing for us to do. Jesus prayed that his disciples would go into the world to bring the same healing and unity they were given. This is what Simba did. His heart healed, knowing his father was with him, he returned home to confront Scar and restore the Pride Lands with the help of the lionesses and other animals. That's our calling as we draw on Jesus' presence within us. Jesus loved those who acknowledged their failings and wanted to grow from them. He had less patience for the sinful systems and corporate habits at the root of those failings. Our call is to confront those systems, working with others to restore the world to a place of abundance for all.

Beloved, today we remember not just how Jesus returned to God, but that through his presence we continue his mission. Like Simba grieving his father, or the disciples unsure of what to do next, we need at times to wait and pray. But we can't stay waiting. We also are called to go to the world to bring healing. As we do we can be sure Christ lives in us, helping us extend their love. Amen.