

Sermon: The Line Where the Sky Meets the Sea

Written By: Rev. Jessica M Ashcroft-Townsley

Scripture: 1 Cor. 10:23-26; Matt 6:24-34

Many of you have no doubt noticed that I am the kind of person who sees God in unexpected places. We've talked about everything from Mary Oliver to popular music to major motion pictures and last week, even a sitcom. Last August, we explored spiritual themes in, of all places, Superhero movies. Sticking with this idea of "August at the Movies," I thought this year we'd explore kid's movies—primarily because our Christian educators are taking this month to breathe after a whopping success with VBS. The first films that sprang to mind were Disney films. The exciting thing about Disney movies is that we have beloved classics (like *Sleeping Beauty*, which we'll talk about in a few weeks) and we also have many new, exciting films that allow children (and grown-ups) to explore the stories of people from other cultural backgrounds. So, with Disney, we don't *just* get the blonde princess's story, but also the stories of princesses like the Tiana, the lead from *The Princess and the Frog*, and Jasmine, the main female protagonist in *Aladdin*. We are a church whose vision is to become, "a vibrant and diverse community of Christians that welcomes and seeks out people from all walks of life, and that supports the spiritual, physical, and emotional needs that challenge the community and its members." Given this truth, the movies of the Disney universe are most appropriate.

Of course, the problem in choosing from Disney movies is that there are an enormous number of them, so narrowing that down is tough. Ultimately, I chose our films based on the following rubric:

1. If I'm going to be watching and analyzing them, I must first ask: do I like them?
2. We're talking about them in church, so: Is there a spiritual message in this film?
3. Is the music decent? Because I knew we'd be using clips from the films.
4. Are these movies folks will be familiar with *and/or* are they popular with the children? I knew we needed a balance of classic Disney and some newer hits.

All this led me to select: *Moana*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Encanto*, and *Sleeping Beauty/Maleficent*. Today, of course, we begin with *Moana*.

For those who aren't familiar *Moana* is the story of the teenage daughter of the chief of the people of the island of Motonui. Now, the thing about the people of Motonui is that they take care of one another, and part of that care is in keeping one another safe. They remind me a lot of the early church, actually. Sharing everything they have, supporting, loving one another, and working toward a common purpose. This island is, perhaps, exactly what church should be. Except in one aspect: while the disciples are called to go into the world and all its nations, the people of Motonui are stuck in place. They do not venture beyond the barrier reef, which means, they see nothing of the outside world. They don't interact with it, and they would never go on a trip somewhere. One of the songs emphasizes, in fact, that they have everything they need right where they are.

Moana knows from her earliest memory that she will one day be expected to take over as chief of her people, which would be great, if Moana didn't feel called to the sea, instead. When she is a toddler, she finds that the water of the ocean responds to her. She toddles into it picking up sea shells and it makes a path for her, eventually revealing a beautiful green stone and gifting it to Moana. Moana doesn't know it at the time because she's too little, but, like many cultures, hers has an origin story of the world and it begins with Maui, a demigod of the wind and sea, who stole the sacred life-creating heart stone (the very stone the ocean has given her) from Te Fiti, island goddess of creation. Maui intended the stone to be a gift for humanity, so that humankind might hold the power of the gods to create life. However, during his escape from Te Fiti, Maui is attacked by a lava demon of Earth and fire known as Te Ka, loses the stone of Te Fiti as well as his giant magic fish hook which allows him to shape shift, and then Maui winds up stranded on a desolate island.

This all happened a thousand years before Moana's time, but she grows up being told this story just as we are told the creation stories in the Hebrew Bible (or Old Testament). Moana, feeling called by the ocean, much as we might feel called by the natural world around us or, as I like to think about it, the Spirit of God within the natural world around us, seeks out the wisdom of her grandmother, Tala, who shares with Moana the secret

of their people: they were once voyagers, explorers of the great sea beyond the barrier reef. Tala, too, has a special relationship with the sea. She tells Moana that the voyagers had stopped voyaging when they began encountering monsters who pursued them on the sea. They believed this to be the result of the theft of Te Fiti's heart stone. Over time, the people of the island begin to experience crop failure—all their coconuts, which are their primary source of sustenance, are turning black inside and the fisherman even experience empty nets, their waters having “dried up” of all fish. On her deathbed, Tala tells Moana they she must take the heart stone beyond the reef, find Maui, and command him to return it to Te Fiti so that their island and all others might be saved. And so, Moana ventures into unknown waters, literally, on her quest to save her people.

Along the way she meets the narcissistic and rather confused Maui, who envisages himself as a hero of humankind. After some convincing, Moana and Maui begin their quest. Of course, along the way they encounter plenty of obstacles, including an encounter with an underworld ruled by Tamatoa, a menacing giant crab with a wild personality and a whole lot of shiny baubles attached to his shell, one of which happens to be Maui's hook, which Moana and he successfully extricate from its dastardly owner.

Finally, Maui and Moana arrive at the island of Te Fiti only to find that, surprise! Te Fiti isn't there, but Te Ka, a lava demon, sure is. As they flee from the lava demon, Moana realizes that Te Ka wasn't Te Ka at all, but that instead Te Fiti had turned into Te Ka. The goddess of life, left abused and without her heart, has become a most terrifying, ferocious monster. But Moana, understanding what has happened, compassionately reaches out to Te Ka, embraces her, and returns her heart stone, and she once again reverts to Te Fiti. At the end of the film, we see that the life force of the island has been restored and Moana's people have reconnected with their voyaging ancestral roots.

This is a story that holds great resonance for us today, whether we are Christian or not, but, I think, especially for we who believe in God as Creator. As I watched the creation story of the people of Motonui, I was reminded of our own creation stories from Genesis, referenced already today in our call to worship. The creation story of the people of Motonui mirrors ours in a number of ways, but most notably, at least from my

reading, is its subtext about the moral life of the community. When God created the universe, the earth and all things in it, God also placed humankind in a perfect garden, lush and full of all things they would need to live fruitful, abundant lives. But with all the goodness and light, God also gave the first humans an instruction: God told them they could not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And, well, they didn't listen, did they? So powerful was the draw and temptation to know what God knows and be as God is, that the first humans could not help but give in. And this, we're told, is really the beginning of all the trouble in our world that was to follow.

We have to remember, of course, that the creation story in scripture is really creation stories. One which gives us the creation of the primordial light in the watery, dark chaos and all the things that followed and the other, which homes in more specifically on the creation of humankind and its relationship with the earth. The first creation account, which scholars call the Priestly account (Genesis 1), tells us that God created us in their image and gave us dominion over the earth. But the second account, the J-source in Genesis 2, gives us a slightly different view. In it, humankind become steward, caretakers, servants of the soil—a vocation which is made monumentally more difficult because of humankind's disobedience in trying to be as God is.

Throughout scripture, there are numerous references to the natural world which refer to the beauty of what God has created with reverence. In Genesis, when God brings forth the earth and all things in it, God calls that creation good, each and every bit of it, good. We have the Psalms which tells us that God shall be praised from heaven and earth, not just by humankind, but that nature, itself, the fields and woods and mountains, and all things with breath will rejoice in God's goodness (Psalms 150, 146, and 96, among others). Psalm 104 sings of God causing the grass to grow for the cattle, and herbs for humans, the Lord, it says, brought forth food from the earth.

In both Matthew and Luke, Jesus, himself, calls on us to give consideration to nature. We read in Matthew: "Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet, I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothes like one of these." Just before that, he implores those listening, as they worry over all the little things instead of trusting in God for all things, to think about the birds of the air, who don't

worry over where they will get their next meal nor store up for themselves barns full of food. God provides for them, just as God provided for the first humans, just as God provides for us.

In Matthew 6:24, Jesus says, “You cannot serve God and wealth.” We want wealth because that wealth gives us power. We want the power to control our lives, every facet, and forget how vital it is to rely on God for our needs. Our VBS kids learned this week to pray that special prayer which includes, “Give us this day our daily bread,” as a reminder that all we have is because of God’s great love for us. When we store up great wealth for ourselves to the exclusion of the good we could do for others, we aren’t living the gospel imprint.

When we keep assaulting and ravishing the earth for all our wants, instead of our needs, we cause damage, the consequences of which we are really only beginning to see. We want not just what we have, but we want more, and we don’t want to give up a thing to begin to heal the damage we have caused. The story of Maui’s quest to give humankind more authority, the power of life, itself, wreaks all kinds of havoc on their world. So much so, in fact, that they are confined to one island—and they live there for some time before even that safe place begins to suffer the consequences of the ravages of this ill-fated quest. And then even they realize something has got to change, but only one among them has the guts to do it.

Now, I know for many any mention of humankind’s impact on the environment in church will immediately provoke calls that I am being political. And if you’re inclined to see that as political, there’s probably not much I can do to convince you that it really isn’t. Look around. See the way weather patterns are changing. See the severe, record-breaking heat waves around the world. See the pain of widespread droughts and famine unheard of just years ago. See the record flooding and wild fires and devastating storms happening all over the world. We’re using more than we need of our resources and we’re using them in a manner that is becoming destructive to the created world we have been called to be good stewards of.

The apostle Paul writes in his first letter to the church at Corinth, “the earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it.” This truth of our spiritual belief system hasn’t been lived fully into. Humankind has taken, taken, taken from the world because we think dominion is synonymous with abuse, rather than sound stewardship. We’ve forgotten that stewardship is really a duty of *care*, it requires us to approach the natural world that surrounds us with humility. We may be human and consider ourselves the kings of the jungle, so-to-speak, but we aren’t called to ruin what is ours and God’s; we’re called instead to care for it. And that means approaching it with humility, just as Jesus, himself, does time and again throughout scripture, most memorably, for instance, when he washes the disciples’ feet.

You might say, “but I have my rights!” And you’re correct. We do have rights. We have freedom. We have freedom to do much more than many people around the world do. But, to paraphrase Paul in his letter here, “Just because all things are lawful, doesn’t mean they are good.” Paul wrote, “Do not seek your own advantage, but that of others.” So why not use that freedom to do what is good, just, and right? Why not use that freedom to reach out to the natural world with the same compassion Moana shows to Te Fiti, to care for it the way God cares for us?

In one of the film’s most popular songs, which we listened to earlier, Moana says that the “line where the sky meets the sea” calls to her. But later in the film, she realizes that the call she thought was coming from “out there” wasn’t out there at all, it was inside her all along. We, too have a call that comes from the Spirit of the living God which resides within us all. We are called by God to care for God’s world. Leading with love, with her heart, Moana heals not just the world, but herself and discovers who she truly is. Our journey can be similar if we let it. When we put some of our love back into our care for God’s creation we will find that we have the power to help it heal and, perhaps along the way, we might discover who we, too, truly are: God’s children, partnering with God in our care for the world that provides so much for us. Amen.

Amen.