

Sermon: Visions are Seldom All They Seem

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Scriptures: Proverbs 18:13-17; Luke 19:1-10

Despite this being the first Sunday of September, our minds are still firmly fixed on Summer at least for another day or two. And so, it is fitting that our series *August at the Movies: Disney Edition* should go on into the beginning of the September, even though we will all begin to shift our thoughts toward autumn in mere days. So far in this series on the intersection of faith and film, we have discussed three Disney films: *Moana* and the call to care for creation, *Beauty and the Beast* reminding us to look beneath the surface of those we call “beastly,” and *Encanto* highlighting the importance of communication in our world and in the church. All of these films are from 1991 and after, but for today’s movies—yes, plural—, I thought we should go back to 1959 and the Disney classic, a staple of many of our childhoods: *Sleeping Beauty*. And just to mix things up a bit, I thought we could also talk about *Maleficent*, the 2014’s live-action spin on the very same story.

I don’t suspect many of us need the story of Aurora and Prince Philip explained, so I will offer a brief synopsis of *Sleeping Beauty* and then a little more detail about *Maleficent*. *Sleeping Beauty* is the story of a princess called Aurora, born of King Stefan and his wife, Queen Leah, after ages of no luck producing any children. As is often the case with royals, Aurora is promised to Philip, prince of a neighboring kingdom, to unite their two kingdoms. At her Christening, she is celebrated and given many gifts, the loveliest of which come from three good fairies, Flora, Fauna, and Merriweather. During the gift giving, the final gift is interrupted by the dreaded sorceress, Maleficent, who comes out of nowhere to curse the child. Before the sun sets on her 16th birthday, Aurora will prick her finger on the spindle of a spinning wheel and die. When Maleficent leaves, Merriweather changes her approach to gifting; she will soften the curse so that Aurora will merely fall asleep and be woken only by true love’s kiss.

King Stefan sets out to have every spinning wheel in the kingdom burned and sends Aurora (renamed Briar Rose) to live deep in the forest with her three fairy godmothers, who will take on human visages and not use their magic so as not to be discovered by

Maleficent and her cronies. Through some real Disney magic, right before her 16th birthday, Briar Rose and Philip end up finding one another in the woods, as we saw in our video from earlier, and fall in love. The fairies, not knowing that she has encountered Philip, later tell her she is a princess (so she can't marry this mysterious, gallant man she's found. More than that, they tell her it is time for her to return to the palace that is her home and be reunited with her parents and meet her betrothed.

But, the fairies return her a little too soon because Maleficent finds her and lures her to the spinning wheel, kidnaps the prince, and the kingdom is plunged into slumber. It's the fairies who are the heroines of this story—they rescue Philip so he can slay the dragon (who Maleficent has turned into), and help him get to Aurora to give her true love's kiss. And they all live happily ever after.

In *Maleficent*, we are given a whole new spin on this classic tale. The story begins not with the birth of Aurora, which comes later, but with a fairy called Maleficent who lives in the Moors, a magical forest brimming with fantastical creatures all of whom revere Maleficent. As a child, Maleficent falls in love with a peasant boy called Stefan who visits her often. On Maleficent's 16th birthday, Stefan gives her what he tells her is true love's kiss—but like anyone who's fallen for the wrong person, Maleficent soon realizes it was not love's kiss at all. Stefan and she grow apart over the years as he becomes increasingly ambitious. When the king of the neighboring kingdom tries to violently invade the Moors, Maleficent and her magical creatures stop him, wounding him gravely in the process. He tells everyone as he is dying that anyone who can slay Maleficent will be named his successor. Stefan, seeing this as an opportunity, goes to see Maleficent in the Moors and drugs her. He can't bring himself to kill the fairy, so he "merely" cuts off her wings, instead, using them as proof he has "slayed" the fairy. He is made king.

Years later, he and his wife have a daughter, the famed Aurora we already know so much about. Maleficent does indeed pay an uninvited visit to Stefan and his wife at Aurora's christening and curses her that on her 16th birthday, she will prick her finger on the spindle of a spinning wheel and fall into an eternal slumber only to be awoken by true love's kiss—which is impossible, you see, because she knows this kiss doesn't exist.

Just as in the cartoon version the good fairies take Aurora away to the woods, but Maleficent finds them much sooner in this version, choosing to watch from afar rather than interfere because she knows her curse, by her own bidding, cannot be broken.

In Maleficent's version, the fairies are sadly inept, and Maleficent finds herself caring for the little Aurora, whom she nicknames "beastie." She saves her from countless near-death run-ins and overtime they form a very loving relationship and Maleficent comes to be regarded as godmother. At this point, she wishes she could take back the curse, but realizes she took things a bit too far. She cannot break it. Only true love's kiss can. She feels hopeless as Aurora returns to the kingdom to a mother who has passed away and a father who is blind to anything but his seething hatred and paranoia, thinking of nothing but killing Maleficent. There is a battle between them, which Maleficent wins because Aurora finds her wings encased upstairs in the castle and they magically return to her.

Sadly, though she defeats Stefan, she cannot save her "beastie." Aurora pricks her finger and is plunged into a deep sleep. When Philip is brought in to kiss her, the kiss does not work. Having given up hope now, Maleficent bends to say a tearful goodbye and kisses beastie on the forehead. This love that Maleficent shows happens to be pure and Aurora comes to life. "And now," as the great Paul Harvey used to say, "you know the rest of the story."

This spin on the story allows us to see two sides of the same story. Once through the eyes of a royal family and then through the eyes of the "other" they've so long maligned. As I thought about Disney stories with messages that connect with our faith, these two, specifically came to mind. How often in our lives do we only get one side of the story, take sides, only to find out that there's much more to the story that we didn't know? There's a popular meme out there on social media that shows a line graph divided into two. The line itself is labeled "Someone's story" and a small section is marked off with the label, "What you know about it." So many times we see encounter strangers and make judgements based on a single interaction. We think, "Wow, that cashier sure had an attitude!" or "That unprepared student is so lazy!" or in our road rage we say something like, "Drive much!?!)" (perhaps with a few expletives thrown in for good

measure). Perhaps if we knew more of the story, we might find that that cashier has just been shouted at by three customers in a row during unexpected overtime she's been forced to work. Maybe if we knew more we'd see that that student who seems unkempt and unprepared had to get herself up that morning and walk to school hungry because she has parents who can barely take care of themselves, let alone make sure she has what she needs to succeed. It could be that the driver struggling behind the wheel really doesn't drive much and is lost, trying to find their way in a new city to the bedside of a loved one who is ill.

This morning, we read from the 18th chapter of the book we call Proverbs, a rather complex collection of wisdom sayings written and recorded across vast degrees of times and space. This pericope we read here is part of the second section, which is a section of 375 of individual sayings which give practical advice on how to succeed in life. The section heading calls these, "the Proverbs of Solomon," though this does not necessarily refer to their authorship. In fact, as with many of our biblical books, the authorship of this one is debated and is likely many.

Our section begins with verse 13: "if one gives an answer before he hears, it is folly and shame," warning us against the dangers inherent in jumping to conclusions as is the case in the examples we just discussed. Assuming we know all when we've heard only part is not a strategy to greater understanding or correct reading of any situation or person. The selection continues, "A [person's] spirit will endure sickness, but a crushed spirit who can bear?" (Prov. 18:14). As I think about this saying, I am drawn back to the story of Maleficent. She has her wings cut off, which is heartbreaking, but it is the crushing weight of the betrayal that breaks her spirit and causes her to act villainously against an innocent child. As she learns more watching the little life she's cursed develop, she gains knowledge, which draws on verse 15: "An intelligent heart acquires knowledge and the ear of the wise seeks knowledge." Maleficent will grow to love this little being she calls "Beastie" because she allows herself to get to know Aurora and sees that she is not her father.

But it is verse 17 that draws most of our attention today: “The one who states his case first seems right, until the other comes and examines him.” Here, we find the idea still used in our court systems to varying degrees of success, the principle that encourages us to gain a hearing from both sides of a case. If all we know is the story as told in *Sleeping Beauty*, Maleficent is the “big bad” and Stefan, Aurora, the fairies, and Philip are the protagonists. But, fifty-five years later, we get to see the story through the eyes of maleficent. We hear a fuller telling and are given to understand that Stefan and his ilk may not be quite the heroic bunch they at first appear to be. Of course, Maleficent’s story isn’t simple either. While she is much less the maligned evil witch in her own film, she still shows herself to be multidimensional.

At the end of the film, the narrator (Aurora) says the following, “So you see, the story is not quite as you were told, and I should know, for I was the one they called Sleeping Beauty. In the end, my kingdom was united not by a hero or a villain, as legend had predicted, but by one who was both hero and villain. And her name was Maleficent.” This story as told by Aurora encourages us to understand the many natures living within an individual person. No one is all good or all bad, except, for Christians, Jesus Christ. No one is a hero all the time just like no one is wholly evil.

How many stories of heroes in our scriptures show complicated individuals who are good, until they aren’t? Or show thorny, maligned figures who seem to be bad, until they learn to do better? Our gospel story today shows us one such figure: Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus is a tax collector, the chief tax collector in Jericho, Luke tells us. Tax-collectors in this time, of course, would have been seen as greedy and as traitors who betrayed their community for the sake of the Empire. Many of them were profiteers who practiced corruption and cruelty in an effort to gain wealth. Zacchaeus, though a sinner by Jewish standards and wealthy enough not to “need” Jesus for anything in particular, feels a pull to this miracle man from Nazareth. So he goes to see him. The trouble for Zacchaeus is his kinda a short guy. He’s not got enough height to see over the crowds of people, so he takes it upon himself to climb a sycamore-fig tree to try and gain a glimpse. Jesus, on his arrival, looks right up at this man looking at him from such

heights and immediately asks to stay at his house that day—Zac takes him up on that offer, gladly welcoming him.

And what happens? Well, for one thing, we've got a group of folks who are going to make some assumptions, right? They're saying a whole lot that those proverbs we discussed earlier pertain to, aren't they? The text doesn't indicate how Jesus feels, but Zacchaeus sure is concerned as he hears people whispering about him. So, he feels the need, I imagine, to defend himself. He tries to conform to the generous standard toward wealth that he ought to have, saying that, not only will he give half his wealth to the poor, but he will also pay back (four-fold!) any he has wronged. And it is at that moment, that Jesus pardons his sins and Zacchaeus and his household will experience the salvation that Jesus brings.

Imagine if this story were only told to us by one of those crowd members? Who would Zacchaeus be in their retelling? Goodness, who would *Jesus* even be?! You can bet we wouldn't be lifting Zacchaeus up as one who found God in the Incarnate one, but rather a villain who corrupted even a healer like this Jesus guy. Thank God we've got more to the story, huh? Zacchaeus's story and others like his (Paul's, David's, Mary Magdalene's, etc.) are a reminder to us that no one is exclusively good or exclusively bad.

We all have the capacity for goodness and for evil. When we do wrong, goodness in us (inspired for Christians by our faith) should propel us to find a path to repentance and forgiveness. And then, as Maya Angelou famously said, "When you know better, do better." When we do good, we ought not hold ourselves as better than others, puffing up our chests in arrogant conceit, but should continue to run that race of faith, holding fast to what is good and seeking repentance when... and it will be *when*, not *if*... we need it. Maleficent's heart is open just enough to begin to see Aurora as a blessing and not a curse despite her horrific history with her father, King Stefan. Jesus's willingness to go to Zacchaeus's home, knowing he is a sinner by the standards of the day, is an indication of the kind of openness and acceptance and, yes, forgiveness we ought to show others. I know we aren't Jesus and that acceptance and forgiveness may take some time, but this is what God, through the teachings of Jesus Christ and the

movement of the Spirit, demands of us. Let us remain open, friends. Let us look with softer hearts at other humans, doing their best, to live and move in this world. Let us recognize the God-like-ness in even the most beastly among us, knowing that there is much more to them and their story than meets the eye. Let us remember, to paraphrase the words of our final film of the summer, “people can be both heroes and villains” and we can love them all the same. Amen.