

The Gospel according to Disney sermon series
Peter Pan
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Well, we've come to the end of our "Gospel According to Disney" sermon series, and it's been quite a fascinating journey. When Missy approached me with this sermon series idea last year, I thought sounded like a fun challenge. And it has been! I've really enjoyed revisiting these movies to see the spiritual themes in each one. But I will admit to being glad we're at the end of it. I'm ready to get back to some good old-fashioned violence, betrayal, and R-rated language. And that's just at our church board meetings!

Today's movie is "Peter Pan," and I thought I would start by sharing some really good news. In this movie, unlike almost every other movie we've talked about, both parents are alive! Hurray! Mr. and Mrs. Darling, the parents of Wendy, John, and Michael, are married and very much involved in their children's lives, even if the somewhat stuffy Mr. Darling calls the tales of Peter Pan both "fiddle faddle" and "poppycock," both of which became the names of popcorn-based snacks. Was Mr. Darling an early popcorn magnate? Did he have anything to do with the death of Orville Reddenbacher? Hmm!

You probably know the story: Mr. Darling tells his oldest child, Wendy, that it's time for her to stop telling her younger brothers these fairy tales about Peter Pan, a flying boy who lives in Neverland. Mr. Darling decides that tonight is the last night she'll sleep in the same room as the boys. As Mr. Darling admonishes, "People have to grow up."

After the parents leave for a party, the Darling children get into bed but are awakened by Peter Pan and his fairy companion Tinkerbell. Peter invites Wendy and the boys to go to him with Neverland, where no one has to grow up. With the help of, in Peter's words, "Faith, trust, and pixie dust," the kids join Peter and Tinkerbell on their flight to Neverland. And then, as often happens, hijinks ensue, involving Captain Hook and his pirates, the rowdy Lost Boys, a crocodile who swallowed an alarm clock, and a tribe of native Americans.

A group of us gathered last Tuesday night to watch "Peter Pan" in Lafferty Garden, and when the scene came on with the Native Americans, she remarked uncomfortably, "Well, that didn't age well." It really didn't. The Native Americans are portrayed with about every stereotype you can imagine: peace pipes, drums, whooping, ridiculously fake sign language, pidgin English with "um" attached to every word, women referred to as "squaws." Honestly, I almost didn't choose this movie based on this portrayal alone.

But I did choose it as a reminder that sometimes our cultural worldviews need to grow up. I didn't choose movies like "Dumbo," with a cringe-worthy group of black crows, or "Aladdin" and its stereotypical treatment of Middle Eastern people, and I wasn't even about to touch "Song of the South." Thankfully, we have evolved since then and most of our world has a greater sensitivity to people of different races or ethnicities. My personal prayer is that this evolution continues toward people we are different from us in other ways. There are some folks who want to take our country back to the way it used to be, but the way it used to be included a culture where "Song of the South" was acceptable. I believe our growing up means that we are called to move forward instead of backwards.

But what does this growing up mean when it comes to our faith? The Bible isn't clear on this for me. In some places, it tells some seriously PG-13 stories that aren't meant for little ears, so we recast them in more developmentally appropriate ways. For example, we love to tell kids

the story of Noah's Ark and how the bunnies and the horsies marched two by two onto the ark before the waters start to rise. What we don't tell them is that God then flooded the world and drowned every living person. Or we tell the kids how Moses let God's people through the Red Sea from those mean Egyptians, but we don't tell them that before that, God killed all the first-born children of the Egyptians. The Bible is meant to be the foundation for faith, not nightmares.

Or take our passage today, which encapsulates our dilemma. It starts with Jesus telling his disciples that you have to have the faith of a child to enter God's kingdom, but ends with Jesus talking about cutting off your hand and tearing out your eye if either cause you to sin. Funny enough, this passage has never been used in Vacation Bible School! So, which is it? Are we supposed to approach our relationship with God with child-like innocence or with adult sensitivities and precautions? As Jesus tells his disciples, they are to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Can we be both?

At the end of the movie, the Darling children are returned home by Peter Pan, who then flies back to Neverland. The movie ends with a pirate ship-shaped cloud passing in front of the moon, and Mr. Darling remarking wistfully that the cloud reminds him of something from his childhood. Popycock, indeed!

The ending begs the question: Was Peter Pan real? Or was this just a story that Wendy made up to tell her brothers? It's funny, because the same question has been asked about Jesus. Was he real? Was he the actual messiah who was resurrected from the dead? Or was he just a story made up by his followers to perpetuate supernatural belief in a guy who was just a really wise rabbi who died on a cross? At some point, we have to choose, don't we?

If you look at this world, there are lots of reasons not to have faith. People have been trying to debunk Christianity for centuries, and the church has done a pretty good job of running people off, all in Jesus' name. In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul writes, "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways." Ironically, for a lot of people that has meant putting an end to their faith in God. As they've read the disturbing stories about God in the Bible, as they've seen how God's people have excluded and ostracized and condemned, they've said, "Nope. I don't believe in that."

I don't either, but that's not who I know God to be. Just as our understanding of Native Americans has evolved since "Peter Pan" was made, so should our understanding of God evolve as we grow up into adults. We don't tell children about the people drowned in the flood because they are not able to grasp the complexity of the image of God in that story. But as adults, we are able to wrestle with it and ask questions like, "Is this really how God would act?" and "Are there other ways to understand God in this story other than God as a murderer?" That same kind of faith questions whether God would hate certain groups of people or favor one country over another. For me, that's what it means to grow up as a person of faith, to allow your faith to wrestle with the tensions and doubts our world gives us.

And yet, we are called not to lose our child-like innocence in the midst of it. That means we are willing to look at God as revealed to us through Jesus Christ and choose faith. So much of faith is a conscious choice. God gave us a brain and Jesus told us to love God with all our minds, so that means our faith is meant to be a marriage of heart and head, of emotion and reason. Belief is not just an emotional feeling, it's an intentional decision on our part to say, "I choose to believe that Jesus is who he says he is." That's an adult decision grounded in a child-like perspective. Wise as serpents and innocent as doves.

In "Peter Pan," Mr. Darling is the unbelieving adult, the grown-up who refuses to take seriously any talk of a flying boy and his fairy friend, his band of Lost Boys, his pirate arch-

enemy. Life is too serious for that; people have to grow up. And yet, by opening themselves to the mystery that lies beyond intellectual understanding, Wendy and John and Michael experience the swashbuckling adventure of a lifetime. At some point, reason and understanding ends. That's where faith begins.

Jesus doesn't promise us the ability to fly or the chance to battle pirates, but he does offer us an adventure, a life filled with love and joy and the power to persevere through even the toughest challenges. Jesus invites us to join him as he searches out the lost boys and girls our world to show them the light of God's kin-dom. Jesus rewards our belief with the potential of living a life that means something, that makes a difference, that matters in this world. All Jesus asks for from us is faith and trust, no pixie dust required.

Here's the thing: Was Jesus real? I think so. Not only do we have the four gospels, but we have a few extra-biblical accounts of Jesus and his followers. I believe Jesus the person actually existed on this earth. Now, was he the messiah, who was crucified and resurrected and ascended to Heaven? Well, that's a more grown-up question, isn't it? I know a lot of folks who just can't bring themselves to say "yes" to that because their adult way of understanding how the world works is just too big an obstacle. And I get that.

Maybe some of us can only understand Jesus as a story. Maybe we can't wrap our head around someone coming back from the dead or walking through walls. That's okay. I have been there myself on and off throughout my life. I try to live in a way that says, "I believe," but honestly, I still have my doubts sometimes. It still doesn't make sense, even as an adult. I have often started a point I'm making in a sermon or Bible study with the disclaimer, "I might be totally wrong."

So, here's where I've landed on this flight of faith: I want to learn more and I want to believe more, but I have peace in the idea that even if all of this is just another fantasy like Peter Pan, that I will be better for having listened. I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that I will be a better version of myself in striving to follow God and live like Jesus, even if it turns out the story wasn't true. Because for me, there's historically, factually true, and then there's the truth we find in a life of faith, and I would rather live with hope than without it. It's the difference between Mr. Darling's rigid ideology of "People have to grow up" and Wendy's refusal to do so, opening her up to a world of adventure.

When it comes to living out of our faith, can we all agree to be adults, to evolve in our understanding of God and of other people, not to default to childish behavior like greed and hate and name-calling? But can we also agree to approach our faith with the wide-eyed wonder of a child, ready for God to show us new ways to be in relationship with God and share the love of Jesus? When someone joins our church, we ask them to affirm their faith and then to say "yes" to spending the rest of their life figuring out what that means. That's the real adventure!