

**KAILUA CHRISTIAN CHURCH  
SUNDAY, MARCH 10, 2024  
SERMON: LION KING JESUS  
REV. IRENE WILLIS HASSAN**

**Scripture Readings**

**Numbers 21:4-9**

4 From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea,[a] to go around the land of Edom, but the people became discouraged on the way. 5 The people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food." 6 Then the LORD sent poisonous[b] serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. 7 The people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD to take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. 8 And the LORD said to Moses, "Make a poisonous[c] serpent, and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." 9 So Moses made a serpent of bronze and put it upon a pole, and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

**John 3:14-21**

**14** And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, **15** that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.[a]

**16** "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

**17** "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him. **18** Those who believe in him are not condemned, but those who do not believe are condemned already because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. **19** And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. **20** For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. **21** But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."[b]

## Sermon: Lion King Jesus

Both of these scripture verses are considered iconic, especially the bit from John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” Many Christians I know have that line memorized and often point to it as the pinnacle of our faith.

But what does it really mean? How does God sacrificing His only son actually cleanse us of our sins and give us eternal life? Couldn't God have just chosen to grant us Grace without all the drama of crucifixion and serpents and pain?

To illustrate why God is so dramatic in his attempts to save us, let's talk about the 1992 blockbuster Disney movie, “The Lion King.” I'm assuming most of you have seen this film, but if you haven't, first of all, go watch it, and second of all, here's the story: it's about a young lion cub named Simba who is meant to inherit a fictional African empire called “The Pridelands” from his father, King Mufasa. Unfortunately, Mufasa's evil brother, Scar, has a plan to subvert Simba's inheritance. Scar kills Mufasa using a stampede and falsely blames Simba for his father's death, which makes poor little Simba so sad that he runs off into the wilderness and Scar de facto becomes the new Lion King. While Simba is growing up in the wilderness under the guidance of a boar, a meerkat, and a baboon, Scar strips the Pridelands of its former glory and an ominous shadow of famine and unrest spreads across the land. In the end, Simba ends up coming back from the wilderness and defeats Scar in a fiery battle and restores the Pridelands.

I'm telling you about the Lion King for the same reason I told you about Batman a couple weeks ago: like Batman, the creators of the Lion King totally stole the plotline from Jesus' life and mission. In both the Bible and the Lion King, evil has spread over the land and the heroes (Simba, Moses, Jesus) have to go through a discouraging experience in the wilderness in order to find the strength to overcome the evil that is decimating their Kingdoms. There is sacrifice, struggle, and heartache for the protagonists to embark such an epic journey to save the world.

And it's not just the Lion King. Star Wars, Harry Potter, To Kill A Mockingbird – all the classic stories of our time run on this same model of a hero needing to defeat an insidious evil darkening their respective contexts, and to do so, the hero needs to die or undergo some intensive, sorrowful sacrifice in order to gain the skills and fortitude to defeat that evil. There's actually a thematic title for the plotline of the Jesus story and the contemporary iteration of it – it's called “The Hero's Journey”.

If someone ever asks you, or if you ever get caught asking yourself – what does it mean that Jesus died for me, and why was that necessary? You can point out that this narrative of heroic sacrifice to save the world is one of the most, if not *the* most,

common theme of a lot of the world's best literature. The concept of Jesus dying for our sins sounds abstract, but when we put it context of the stories we see in books or cinema, it can make sense to almost anyone. When evil overcomes the land, a sacrificial Hero is what's needed to save us all.

God probably *could* make the Hero's Journey less dramatic. He probably could just single handedly defeat the evil in the world without anyone having to sacrifice or experience heartbreak. He could probably just grant us forgiveness without having to sacrifice His own son.

Yet, if God just handed us everything, we wouldn't have power over our own stories. The Lion King wouldn't have been nearly as good a movie without the death of Mufasa and the wilderness adventure of Simba with the meerkats and baboons. It wouldn't have been nearly as meaningful if Simba had simply inherited the Pridelands without any triumph over the opposition to his destiny. The dramatic arc of "The Hero's Journey" is what makes the story come alive. The result of restoration is great, but the journey itself is what grips us and calls to our hearts, because the human experience of suffering and thirst for redemption is relatable to each and every one of us.

God could just override evil and take away our free will to make bad decisions, but he doesn't. He loves us and wants us to make a purposeful decision to be with Him, rather than forcing us into a relationship with Him by taking away our autonomy. The sacrificial Hero shows us the way to transform out of suffering and defeat the evil that threatens us, which is why it's been such a captivating plotline since Biblical times.

Our pop culture references to the Hero's Journey show us that sacrifice of a Hero to save the world isn't an abstract concept; it's an idea that speaks to the heart of all humankind. You may remember my sermon about "Batman Jesus": Batman and the fascination with his Jesus-like thirst for justice ignite in us the ability to do the same, yet, if we actually tried to be night vigilantes we would likely not be as successful as fictional Batman. The Lion King is the same – our time spent in the wilderness seeking redemption is often a lonely place that can threaten to drive us deeper into sadness and isolation if we spend too long alone inside that place of suffering. Time spent playing hero or vigilante propelled by our own hubris has caused many to devolve into the chaos and destruction that they were originally attempting to combat. The Israelites lost in the desert are a perfect example of this: they left Egypt feeling like they had conquered the world, only to find they needed God and His guidance to actually complete their journey.

Those movie characters exemplify living into a call to sacrifice oneself to achieve a greater good, which seems attainable until you've actually lived the harrowing experience of trial and suffering, or tried helping other people out of trial and suffering. Despair is a very difficult thing to break free from by the power of your own will. The

difference between Jesus' sacrifice and Simba's, or Luke Skywalker's, or Harry Potter's, is that Jesus wasn't simply an unattainable symbol of courage to overcome suffering and triumph over evil. God sent His only son as a sacrifice so that *we don't have to endure the trials of life alone.*

God's sacrifice of His only son not only gives us the autonomy to transform our stories with our own free will, it additionally takes the burden from us having to do it by ourselves. Jesus's sacrifice exemplifies the human journey of triumph over suffering, but more importantly, it absorbs that suffering for us so that we don't have to go into the wilderness alone and risk getting lost in it.

These fictional representations of our yearning for transformation captivate us. They show us that we understand the concept of Jesus sacrificing himself to save mankind. However, Jesus's unique sacrifice makes the transformative outcome of our sacrifices and hardships attainable because through Him we're not solely responsible for saving ourselves or the world. We don't have to be vigilante Batman, fighting injustice by ourselves – God will triumph over the injustice for us if we only believe He can. We don't have to be Simba, alone in the wilderness, isolated and grieving – God will be with us and empower us to move through the darkness and into redemption. For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

God gives you autonomy over your story to seek redemption through the trials of life. But God also doesn't make you do it by yourself, for Jesus is with you, carrying that weight for you. God can overcome all obstacles, including death, and we have the privilege to be on that journey with Him instead of carrying our cross alone in the wilderness. If there was ever an argument that God is good and loves us and doesn't want us to endure suffering and resilience alone, the verse from John 3:16 is it.

Together through Him, we can succeed, and all those redemptive stories of the Hero's Journey that captivate us can move from screens and books into the very stories of our lives. Amen.