

## Remember Who You Are

Isaiah 5:1-7

Crossroads Christian Church

Hebrews 11:29—12:2

August 14, 2016 Pentecost 13C

One of those oldie but goodie Disney movies that I love is *The Lion King*. The story begins with the joy of Simba's birth, as heir to the throne of his father, King Mufasa. The young Simba has to flee from the Pridelands kingdom when his father is murdered by Simba's uncle, Scar. Deep in the safety of the jungle, Simba joins up with two characters, Timon and Pumba, whose philosophy of life is "Hakuna Matata," a term that means, "no worries." It's a laid-back, have-a-good-time, play-it-safe approach to life. Simba buys into this for his growing up years, enjoying a life with no worries, no responsibilities. Meanwhile, under the dictatorship of the wicked uncle Scar, the Pridelands fall into ruin, famine, and despair. Then one day the baboon Rafiki, the 'holy man,' tracks down Simba and offers to take him to a place where he can meet his dead father. Intrigued, the young lion follows Rafiki until he reaches a clearing. There, in the clear night sky, Simba remembers his roots. He has a moving vision of his father, who laments, "You have forgotten who you are, and therefore, you have forgotten me." Simba rediscovers who he is: He is Mufasa's child, the son of the king. And he returns to the Pridelands to liberate his people and, after struggle, take his place as ruler.

Remember who you are. Good advice. I read once where a young woman recalled her teen years, and when she'd leave the house, she'd call to her family, "Bye, love you" and would hear her mom or dad respond "Remember who you are." That little phrase became stored in my heart. She knew that it meant that she was to act with integrity and remember where she come from, remember what she valued, and remember the kind of person she wanted to become. Wise words.

Remember who you are. The phrase makes me think about baptism. In churches that baptize infants, there is a naming involved. The child already has a name, of course, but the minister asks the name, and repeats it when saying the words of baptism. But even when we are baptized as older children, or youth, or adults, there's still a sense of being named and claimed by God. We rejoice when we see someone come up out of the water into a new life, and God rejoices too. Every time that I perform or watch a baptism, I remember my own, and I remember who I am as a beloved child of God, and, like Simba, I remember, "Yes, I'm the child of the King." And so are you. We need these reminders, for, like Simba, we sometimes take the easy, irresponsible paths, the wrong paths, and we drift away from our true identity, we try to make it on our own and not worry about what it means to be a Christian, to be a part of a Christian community. That's one of the reasons we come to worship each Sunday, to remember who we are as part of a community of faith.

When the great Protestant reformer Martin Luther would feel surrounded by enemies around and fear or depression within, he would touch his head, and say to himself, *baptismatus sum*. I am baptized. He didn't say, "I was baptized," referring to an event in the past. He said, "I am baptized," referring to his state of being—who he was as God's child. This gave him the strength to go on.

All these stories about remembering who we are, Simba, the teenage girl, Martin Luther, all take us back to the book of Hebrews. As I said last week, the epistle as a whole was written to challenge and inspire Jewish Christians to stay faithful; to hold true to the promise; to not let their faith and love wither away in a difficult time. Earlier in Hebrews 11, before today's lesson, faith is called "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Then the writer recalled to them their own Jewish heritage, how Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, and Moses all lived by faith. We heard today about how it was by faith that their ancestors, our ancestors, once enslaved in Egypt, followed Moses through the Red Sea and escaped slavery. It was by faith that they survived in the wilderness. It was by faith that they crossed into the Promised Land and settled there. It was by faith in later centuries that God worked through leaders who would save the people from disaster—judges, kings, prophets, martyrs. Only through their faith—their trust in God's promise—did their ancestors keep the faith alive, so that one day we would receive the promise of Jesus Christ.

Then the writer uses a wonderful image. Are you enjoying the Olympic games from Rio? Remember how the athletes would run or swim or do gymnastics, or play sports to the cheering crowds? Here in Hebrews 12, we are like runners in a race, but we're not running the race alone. We are surrounded by a "great cloud of witnesses," our own cheering section, people waving flags and calling our names. Who are they? They are God's faithful people of the past, cheering us on. When we get tired and frustrated, we don't give up, because they are rooting for us and expect us to stay faithful. Like an athlete in training, we put aside the things that slow us down; the sins, the fears, the selfishness that would distract us from the race, and keep our eyes on the goal. But unlike the Olympics, this isn't a race where one person or team wins and the others lose. It's more like a spiritual Special Olympics, where the emphasis is on teamwork and trying. Our coach is Jesus Christ, and even though Jesus Christ crossed the finish line for us, but that should inspire us to run all the harder.

Anna Murdock reflected on the passage this way, addressing her own supporters in the Christian race:

"Oh, my dear great cloud of witnesses, thank you for so many things. Tonight, I'm picturing this "race" as found in Hebrews as a great relay event, not as a lone stretch of road in a marathon. You are a part of my relay race. Some of you are sitting in the stands, among your own witnesses, and theirs before them ... all becoming a part of my own great cloud. Some of you are slapping the baton in my hand in this race. My hands sting at times from the transfer. Others run out to pick up the baton that I might have fumbled and

dropped ... and it is handed to me once again. A few have taken me by the shoulders and turned me in the right direction! Some of you are holding cool cups of water, with my name on them, just within my reach. There are times when I feel as if I am one of the children who are always around you know, the ones who run their own little races in their own little ways. And still, I see you there, nudging and cheering on this little child named "you can insert your name here". And often, you have reminded me to rip off those things that slow me down."<sup>1</sup> Good words from Anna Murdock.

A neat thing about this passage from Hebrews is that we can just keep on continuing the story. The great cloud of witnesses, the cheering section, continues to expand through the years. Apostles and missionaries, preachers and teachers, and faithful lay people of every generation from them to now, have brought us to where we are today.

Cartoonist Cathy Guisewite, who created the "Cathy" comic, spoke at a college graduation. She gave the graduates this advice. "When you remember what you love, you will remember who you are. If you remember who you are, you can do anything."<sup>2</sup>

We can take it one step forward. When you remember who you love and who loves you, you will remember who you are. When you remember your baptism and the God who created you and who loves you, you will remember whose you are. If you remember whose you are, you will have a faith to move mountains, a faith that will take root and grow, a faith that will help transform the world. Amen.

by Michael E. Dixon

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<sup>1</sup> Anna Murdock, in post to [midrash@joinhands.com](mailto:midrash@joinhands.com).

<sup>2</sup> Cathy Guisewite, graduation speech at University of Michigan.