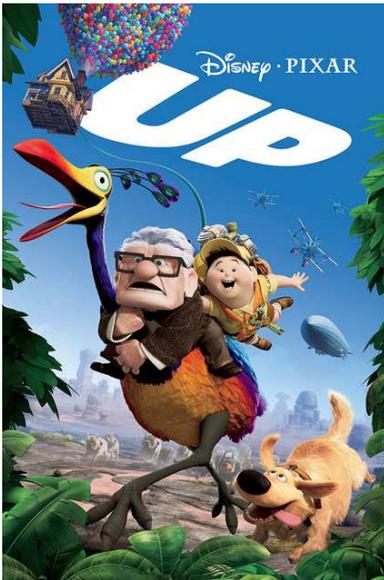


“GOING AND LETTING GO” (the movie “UP”)

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16 and Luke 18:18-30 (Pastor Hubert, March 1, 2015)



Last Sunday, those who were here heard our Moderator Gary Paterson preach at our Presbytery's closing worship. Somehow he was able to deliver powerful *and* fun message based on the - Lego Movie. I recommend watching it online if you can.

Now *my* preaching skills are not anywhere near that of our moderator, but I *AM* a movie geek, and it gave me an idea for today, the 2nd Sunday in Lent and a movie that connects to it: that wonderful Pixar movie "Up", which won the Oscar for best animated feature a few years back.

The movie starts with Carl and Ellie meeting and becoming childhood friends; and then, in what must be one of the finest five minutes of animated film yet produced, we watch them fall in love, get married, buy a house, discover they can't have children, weep, laugh, dream of a wild adventure – a trip to Paradise Falls in South America – a dream that never happens, well, because life happens and gets in the way. Until finally, just when Carl and Ellie have the tickets in hand, Ellie falls sick, and dies. And Carl is left utterly alone at the Funeral Home. There has been time for birth and death; time for much laughter and disappointment, of love and now it's time of big hurt.

So ordinary; so simple; so... profound. You know that Carl and Ellie have lived well. But then it ends, with death. And Carl has to let go of Ellie.

It's the letting go that's difficult. It's hard and painful. None of us is very good at it. Carl certainly isn't. He shrinks into a little old man, boxed in, grumpy, grouchy, crotchety. Even the way the Pixar people created him illustrates it: a boxy, angular an square design. His life is bound by the four walls of his house and his memories of the past. His life has no real purpose anymore and he is basically waiting to die.

Now, let's pause for a moment, and think about the season we're in now, the season of Lent. This is the 2nd week of Lent, the 40-day period before the Easter celebration. Of course the number 40 carries a deep significance in countless Bible stories. The people of Israel spent 40 years in the desert before they entered the promised land. Jesus spent 40 days in the desert fasting. Moses spent 40 days on Mount Sinai to receive the 10 commandments. Before that, he spent 40 years in Median, paying his dues to his uncle. In the story of Noah and the arc, it rained for 40 days. And how long did Noah have to wait before he could open the doors of the arc? Yup, 40 days. The number-40-list goes on and on, and if you look at what all these numbers 40 have in common you'll see they're all about trials and testing. About stopping to think what we are about, what our purpose is. About what's important in life and what is not so important. In other words: it's about what to hold on to, and what to let go of.

So the 40-day period of Lent is a form of... test. And if we look at it from a biblical perspective, it's an invitation to ask ourselves what's important and what is not. What to hold on to - and what to let go of. Many people give something up for Lent, also as a test. Not as a downer, mind you. Not to punish yourself and make yourself feel miserable, on the contrary.

I still vividly remember how in my early 20s I gave up sweets and candy and cookies and wine and beer for 40 days straight. Man, was that a downer! I couldn't *wait* for Easter to arrive and enjoy all those goodies again, or a glass of wine! I became obsessed with chocolate chip cookies and potato chips, and I remember dreaming of cool tall glasses of Heineken beer. Sure, it was a test alright, but it missed the point entirely. Instead of thinking about what's important in life I was obsessing about the things that were *not* important!

The whole point of a test in the biblical sense is to distinguish the difference between the frills of life and life's important things; to learn how to let go of unnecessary frills, of loosening our grip on "stuff", learning that when the time comes to let go, to let go... Not so much a downer, as if deprivation and suffering are good for you "just because" Think of giving up something for Lent as a symbolic reminder that there must be a never-ending "letting go" - at the very heart of life.

It has been said that anything you can't let go of – well, it possesses you. Think of Lent as an invitation to explore what possesses us, the things that hold us back from fulfilling our true potential.

Now let's go back to the movie "Up" – What if we were to see this as a Lenten film with an Easter conclusion. What if we were to see this movie as a holy invitation to "let go" in order to discover... well, to use Jesus' words: to discover eternal life. Which can only be found, Jesus says, if you're willing to give up your life.

So... there's Carl... trapped by his memories and gripped tightly by the way things were, with every picture frame and chair and plate in their spot, not allowed to move even an inch. These things, precious as they are, control his life, they possess him. Carl desperately needs to let go, although he does not realize it.

It is only when crisis arrives – when Carl is about to be shipped off to an Old Folks' Home – that he knows that this may be his last chance. He's 78 years old, but it's never too late to take off into new adventures. To take a chance on the new and the unknown. And then it happens: thousands of helium balloons explode out of the chimney of Carl's home; they rip the house from its foundations and send Carl into a magnificent journey "Up, Up and away". He floats over the city, through a storm, over the rainbow you could say, into a land full of strange creatures, talking dogs, enemies and challenges – and the opportunity of a great discovery... of himself.

And in his strange new surroundings, Carl makes new friends who remind him that he used to have a dream: to take his house, his and Ellie's house, down to Paradise Falls, and perch it right on the edge of the cliff, right above the tumbling waters. It's an impossible dream... exactly the kind that can nudge you into action. But what Carl doesn't know – and I think Jesus *did* know – is that letting go and following the dream can change you forever.

So Carl sets out to follow his dream and manages to get to Paradise Falls, pulling, dragging and floating his home to exactly where Ellie had always imagined it to be placed... and he actually makes it! It's got a great view; perfect view. For a few precious moments it seems like paradise lost can be regained after all.

But... In this grand adventure, a *second* dream gets born, one that is much more urgent than putting his and Ellie's house on the perfect spot. Carl's new friends, Little Russell the Wilderness Explorer and Kevin the Bird and Doug the Dog all need his help. They're the only friends he's got! To help them, he must to confront the full power of evil embodied in Charles Muntz, a fellow adventurer. Charles Muntz is someone who has held onto his dream for so long that it has become twisted, self-serving and obsessive. It possess him.

The moment comes when Carl has to make his choice... there he is, in his and Ellie's house at picture-perfect Paradise Falls, and suddenly... he begins to drag everything out of his house, throwing it all away, in order that he can become airborne once again, free to move, choosing to help others. And so the movie leads us to the grand finale with two old coots, Carl and evil Charles Muntz, in a fight for their lives. Carl is helped by the talking dog, a roly-poly kid and Big Bird of the Jungle. They're a pitiful bunch of losers that don't have a hope in hell to defeat evil itself. But they can try, and try they do. And by taking this leap of faith, Carl discovers the power of human connection, of friendship, of embracing life. 78-year old Carl and 9-years old Russell are an unlike couple, but they belong together, like a widower without children, like a kid without a father.

Eventually they make it back home...and here's where hints of Easter slide into the film. Because once back home they discover you don't have to fly over the rainbow to have adventures, to experience love and joy – and sacrifice. They realize it be found by committing yourself to the people you love... like Ellie, like Russell, like yourself. Because ultimately, that's what Carl did at far-away Paradise Falls: he was found *and* found himself... by letting go of everything that held him back. It was hard and challenging - and it made him a whole new person.

We, too, can be found through the grace of God, who keeps offering us new opportunities to let go; Lent is one such opportunity. And each time we find the courage to let go of something, we discover what's really important in our life - and in our faith.

Amen.