

Oregon City United Methodist Church  
18955 S. South End Road  
Oregon City, OR 97045

Rev. Michael Benischek  
503-522-9807  
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**Series: Into the Woods**

**Sermon: Rapunzel, LET DOWN YOUR HAIR!**

**Isaiah 43:1-3a (NIV)**

But now, this is what the Lord says—

he who created you, Jacob,

he who formed you, Israel:

“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;

I have summoned you by name; you are mine.

2 When you pass through the waters,

I will be with you;

and when you pass through the rivers,

they will not sweep over you.

When you walk through the fire,

you will not be burned;

the flames will not set you ablaze.

3 For I am the Lord your God,

the Holy One of Israel, your Savior;

**Psalm 31:9-10, 12 (NIV)**

Be merciful to me, Lord, for I am in distress;

my eyes grow weak with sorrow,

my soul and body with grief.

10 My life is consumed by anguish

and my years by groaning;

my strength fails because of my affliction,

and my bones grow weak.

12 I am forgotten as though I were dead;

I have become like broken pottery.

**John 16:31-32 (NIV)**

31 “Do you now believe?” Jesus replied. 32 “A time is coming and in fact has come when you will be scattered, each to your own home. You will leave me all alone. Yet I am not alone, for my Father is with me.

**Sermon**

Incoming Freshman. Sitting on a bus, three hour ride. Filled with kids going to an amusement park on a high school band trip. And I felt alone. Alone enough to remember it 34 years later. How is it possible to feel so alone surrounded by people, by life, by what should have been a fun outing. It's possible. It wasn't the other kids fault, it wasn't my parent's fault, its probably not even my own fault (in a way), for my social chops haven't caught up to who or where I was in life. Eventually, I learned new social skills and found my place.

Fast forward, twenty years or so I'm at a training event in Dallas - didn't have a vehicle. We went to training in the morning and afternoon, and we had the evenings free. The other participants were in their groups, but I came as a loner from out of state. Sitting in the dorm with nothing to do one evening, I just felt the craving to be around other people. So I found the nearest bus station and figured out how to get to downtown Dallas. And walked around that evening just to be around others. And figured out what bus to take back late that night.

I love my alone time. But I don't want to FEEL alone. Introverts still need people. Still need a group. Still need to belong. Still need a purpose.

You may have had those moments where you have felt utterly alone or misunderstood. We all have been there. Maybe you can think of times in the past, or maybe you are feeling them now. This is a time of isolation, isn't it? This is a time of self-quarantine, of literally hiding behind a mask. Maybe this time of loneliness gives us a chance to feel what many feel all around us.

Our sermon series this season is called, "Into the Woods", where we have taken a few of the old Grimm fairy tales and see if there are echoes of scripture within, a life lesson to be gleaned. Something for the faithful to take away. Today's story is Rapunzel. Like I said in the kid's time, that was the sanitized version. In the real Grimm story, a husband is caught stealing a plant called "Rapunzel" by an enchantress. He was stealing it for his wife was pregnant and had nightly cravings for that particular plant. For his transgression, the witch asks for the child in return, once she is born. And the deal was struck. The enchantress called the girl "Rapunzel" after the stolen vegetable. When the beautiful child was 12 with long golden hair, the witch took her away and locked her in a tall tower with no stair nor door, only a window to look out. And when the witch wanted to go in and out, she would call out, and you know the line, Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair." Out when the hair, dropped to the ground, and "mom" would climb up and down. One day a prince was riding by when he heard the sound of beautiful singing, looked up, and there was a girl, locked in a tower, with her head out the window singing to the world. He saw no way to go up, nor for her to go down, but then he heard the witch approaching. He hid in the bushes, and watched the spectacle of Mother Gothel call out to her "daughter", Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair" and up she went, and a little later, down she went and on her way. The prince thought he could mimic this little trick, so he came out to the tower, and said, "Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair." Down came the hair, up went the prince, and as fairy tales go, professed his love for her. And they plan for her escape - he will sneak in a piece of silk at each visit, and she will weave that into a ladder. Why he just didn't bring a ladder, I don't know. I didn't write the story. He visits her at night, for Mother Gothel visits during the day. One day, Rapunzel lets out a clue that there is a boyfriend - the Grimm brother's write that the clothes are getting a little tight around the belly, IE, child on the way? The witch kicks her out the tower to wander the wilderness alone, but not before cutting her hair off. That night, the prince showed up, R.R. Let down your hair, and the witch heaves out the hair, he climbed it, surprise surprise, it's mom. And she is NOT happy. He jumped out the window, his fall broken by a thorn bush. And is blinded. And he wanders the woods for weeks and weeks, months and months, and one day he finds Rapunzel in the forest, who now has twins. They cleave together, and her tears have the magical abilities to heal his eyes and he sees her and his children. And they live happily ever after. Wow. A lot to unpack in that. It is a story of loneliness. The original couple wanted a child so bad, Grimm called them a "lonely couple." The witch was also lonely, which is why she asked for the child. The child was lonely, locked in the tower all this time. The prince was a lonely character, settling for a locked up peasant with freaky hair and crazy mom. And all of the wanderings in the woods scream loneliness and despair. And I thought I was lonely.

This is from Psychology Today: The newest epidemic in America now affects up to 47% of adults—double the number affected a few decades ago" Half of us are lonely. Lonely enough to say that we are lonely on a survey. Isn't that unreal? Almost a third, or 31%, of married people report being lonely - they cite that part of the problem may be the high expectations people have of marriage and their spouses in general. This staggering data has relevance because of its correlation with increased risk for early mortality, risk rates similar to those for obesity and excessive smoking or alcohol addiction. Also, the findings relate to adverse health risks such as higher blood pressure, higher body mass index, higher cholesterol. Depression and suicide are also cited.

Social connections are essential. The workplace, for example, is a significant arena for everyday relations since it is where most working adults spend most of their day. Hello Pandemic. In a recent survey of 20,000 U.S. adults, half report feeling alone (40%) or left out (47%). One in four (27%) feel they are not understood. Two in

five (43%) feel relations are not meaningful and they feel isolated (43%). Generation Z (those born after about 1995) was found to be the loneliest generation. And they are the most connected, at least by technology! Thirteen percent of Americans say that zero people know them well.

The Bible is full of characters who express their sense of not fitting-in and feeling isolated and alone. Moses fled alone into the wilderness; - Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers and rotted for years in jail. Ruth lost her husband and was forced to care for her mother-in-law in an unknown land. Paul often talked about bearing ministry in isolation. Do you know where the Apostle John wrote his Gospel? In exile on the island of Patmos.

David, who wrote many of our Psalms, knew of loneliness. Chased from his kin as they tried to take his throne, alone in the woods without a friend, we read, Be merciful to me, Lord, for I am in distress; I am forgotten as though I were dead; I have become like broken pottery. Ouch. But does it sound familiar?

That's great, pastor Mike. Many of us are lonely. What are you going to do about it? Me? Nothing. I can't fix your loneliness. Just as no one could fix my loneliness. It's kind of a self-fixing deal.

But I do know this: What to do if you find yourself in loneliness

1) We Find Friendships. Old friendships. Current friendships. Find new friendships. What's interesting to note is that in all of David's times of isolation, he was actually surrounded by people. And even alone in the wilderness, mighty warriors began to follow David. - Now those are not always the kinds of friends you might ask for. Moses found a new family in Midian. John wrote about no more tears, no more pain. Even old Rapunzel sang in the tower. Reach out. Reconnect. If I tell the world, "Leave me alone. Leave me alone. Leave me alone." Don't be surprised if the world leaves you alone. Hey, why is everyone leaving me alone? In these times of isolation and quarantine, we need to make a quadruple effort to reach out to others. To connect with the people in our life. To not forget that everyone is feeling a little lost right now.

2) If we find ourselves in loneliness, we develop character. Character is not a group project. We develop character in times of our aloneness. As David sat alone and wrote his psalms, what formed was character. Jesus began his ministry after his time in the wilderness. Says one psychologist, "Sometimes we turn to other people in order to feel less anxious or in order to feel alive. It's as though we're using them as spare parts to support our own fragile sense of self." I remember the dirty chores at home on the farm were always "character-building." My dad always used to say that shoveling out the hog barn "builds character." What I knew at the time is that the only thing it built was a healthy smell that lingered way too long. If this is character, I don't want it. No different than you, just different activities at different times. Those words of "it builds character" echo through our lives. When we get dumped or ignored by someone we think we love, we hear the whisper of "it builds character." When we are way behind on writing a term paper or preparing for a test, we hear the chant of "it builds character." When we have the horrible boss experience again, we cling to the words of "it builds character." "It" is really just a fill-in-the-blank space to add in:

Conflict

Hard work builds character

Civil debate

Solving problems

Parenting

Managing

Leading

Each builds character. Just plug it in. Character is a verb, demonstrated in what we do, how we do it, and why we do it. Character is also how we recover. Isolation builds character - it helps us realize who we are.

And lastly, if you find yourself alone. You have the opportunity to discover God's Constant Presence. No one is ever truly alone. How did Jesus put it? You will leave me all alone. Yet I am not alone, for my Father is with me. It is my prayer that you feel the presence of God in everything you do, but especially in those moments when you feel alone. Yea, though I walk through the lonely valley. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. When Robinson Crusoe was shipwrecked on that island, he said he never felt alone - he had a Bible that reconnected him to God above. The first Bible I received was from my parents. In the introduction it shares that God wants to be known. This is the story between God and us. May you find comfort in the fact that God is closer to us than our very breath.

And if we are to be Christ in the world, know this: Christ reached out to the last, the lonely, the lost. Let us also reach out, with open arms, to those who feel like no one understands. Let us reach out, with open arms, to those who are locked up in their homes, in their lives, in their solitude. Let us reach out, with open arms, to those who feel forgotten.

Rapunzel. Isolated and lonely in the tower was called out to. Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair. It was up to her. No one could get to her without her opening the window and providing the braided stair. May this pandemic soon be over so we can gather together soon. But in the mean time, are there people calling out to you? Maybe its time to reconnect. Maybe its time to work on your character. Maybe its time to find the God who is all around us. My child, my child, let down your hair - open up the door. And the family of God said, AMEN!

Intro: Filmed on location.

Children's Time: Hey kids, thanks for stopping by. Today's Grimm fairy tale is one probably familiar to you. Disney had their crack at it a few years ago and is a family favorite of ours. Rapunzel. Or tangled, as the recent movie called it. Like many of the tales we are telling, this one is a little more kid friendly than what Grimm wrote down - you'll catch the darker version in the sermon. But for right now, sit back as we hear those famous words, Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair."

Prayer:

Dear God, there are days that we feel alone. Please bring the warmth of relationships into our lives. Please cover our thoughts with hope. Please send your love into our hearts. We know you are alive in all we experience. May the birdsongs speak to our souls, May the trees remind us of life as some once again begin to bud. We live in an Amazon world, where it is truly possible to live without any human contact. Things and food just magically appear at our door. May the bread we eat remind us that others made our nourishment. May the shows we watch connect us with what is out there. As we reconnect with the world around us, we give thanks for those people in our lives. Help us to be someone in someone else's life. We give you thanks, that even if no one else understands us, that you do. That we are never alone. In your Son's prayer we come together, albeit remotely...

Offertory:

Welcome to the Offering, our chance to give back. As United Methodists, we support many ministries, within the church, outside the church, at home and abroad. One new way for us to support the ministries of our church is a program called Scrip. S-C-R-I-P. It is a Gift Card program. I have used it in other churches, and it is a part of other non profits that I support and belong to. What is Scrip?

Imagine that you can purchase a \$100 gift card to Safeway at your church. You get a \$100 gift card. And Safeway sends the church a percentage. In Safeway's case, it's 4%, or 4 dollars. Or you purchase a \$50 gift card to Nike at your church. You get the full \$50 gift card. Nike sends the church \$6. Or 12%. There are 750 or so name brand gift cards we can purchase, and the church receives a portion back. You can choose to support HOPE food pantry, or Mission Possible, or the children and youth ministry, or supplement your own tithe, or many other areas of the church, of your choosing.

We have order forms in the office. You can also sign up online, at [www.shopwithscrip.com](http://www.shopwithscrip.com). You can order gift cards from there, and OCUMC benefits. You can print off your gift cards, or just use them as you order online from your favorite companies. You can also get the app for your phone. This is the one that I use a lot. I'm in line at Macy's, physically at Macy's, and real quick, I figure I'm spending about x amount of dollars. On my app, I purchase x amount of dollars, and in 30 seconds, a gift card is on my phone. And I pay with a bar code right on my phone. And the church got 10% from Macy's.

Scrip is just another way to support the ministries you believe in - using spending that you're already doing. Ask for an order form in the office, or go online to sign up. And if this all sounds confusing, I would love to sit down with you and show you what is possible. As always, thank you for your support of OCUMC.

Closing: Filmed on location.