

“Jesus Our Lion King”

By Elizabeth D. McLean, Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church

3-25-18 Palm/Passion Sunday

Based upon John 12:12-16; 18:1-19:42

“Are you not thirsty?” said the Lion.

“I’m dying of thirst,” said Jill.

“Then drink,” said the Lion....

“May I — could I — would you mind going away while I do?” said Jill.

The Lion answered this only by a look and a very low growl. And as Jill gazed at its motionless bulk, she realized that she might as well have asked the whole mountain to move aside for her convenience.

The delicious rippling noise of the stream was driving her nearly frantic.

“Will you promise not to — do anything to me, if I do come?” said Jill.

“I make no promise,” said the Lion.

Jill was so thirsty now that, without noticing it, she had come a step nearer.

“Do you eat girls?” she said.

“I have swallowed up girls and boys, women and men, kings and emperors, cities and realms,” said the Lion. It didn’t say this as if it were boasting, nor as if it were sorry, nor as if it were angry. It just said it.

“I daren’t come and drink,” said Jill.

“Then you will die of thirst,” said the Lion.

“Oh dear!” said Jill, coming another step nearer. “I suppose I must go and look for another stream then.”

“There is no other stream,” said the Lion.

It never occurred to Jill to disbelieve the Lion — no one who had seen his stern face could do that — and her mind suddenly made itself up.... she went forward to the stream, knelt down, and began scooping up water in her hand. It was the coldest, most refreshing water she had ever tasted. You didn’t need to drink much of it, for it quenched your thirst at once. Before she had tasted it she had been intending to make a dash away from the Lion the moment she had finished. Now, she realized that this would be on the whole the most dangerous thing of all.¹

If you don’t recognize it, that passage is from C.S. Lewis’ book The Silver Chair, which is part of his *Chronicles of Narnia* series. The lion in the passage is Aslan, Lewis’ famous stand-in for Christ in his mythical world of Narnia. I have been thinking about Aslan and Narnia a lot this week, thanks in part to the dialogue between Pilate and Jesus in today’s Passion narrative. “Are you the king of the Jews?” Pilate asked Jesus. “My kingdom is not of this world,” Jesus answered. “Well that’s pretty obvious,” we think to ourselves. Just look around. I don’t think anyone would confuse our world with all of its violence, hunger, poverty, inequality, and suffering with the kingdom of God, especially if the kingdom of God is supposed to resemble the description in the end of the *Book of Revelation*, when crying and tears are no more, everyone worships God in peace and love, and the trees have healing in their leaves. That image sounds more like Narnia at the end of the Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, when Aslan has defeated the White Witch and the whole kingdom turns into a kind of Eden. It’s an otherworldly dream we

¹ Lewis, C.S., The Silver Chair, (New York: HarperTrophy, 1953,81) 20-22.

would all eagerly step into if we could only find the right wardrobe to allow us to do it. Oh, to be able to live in Narnia! Oh, to be able to worship and serve Aslan, to feel his protective strength and his love.

Aslan the lion is so easy to love, and so easy to worship as a king. He embodies wisdom and patience and mercy matched with fierce strength and power and righteousness. I've been in love with Aslan ever since my mother first read the Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe to me over dinner as a child. All these years later, I still love him so much, that as my own son can testify, I cannot read the scene in which Aslan gives his life to the White Witch and her awful evil followers to save Edmund without sobbing. "You do know he's going to come back again," Nathaniel reassured me as the tears poured down my face. When I saw this scene in the movie version of the book, I think I cried more watching Aslan die than I did watching Mel Gibson's movie "*The Passion*," which may or may not be a good thing for a pastor to admit. I don't know. I guess that we see human violence so often in our world, that it's easy to get inured to it. To see a regal, good, and gentle lion, king of a magical land, be sadistically tortured and killed, however, was for me to see even more clearly the depth of the sacrifice that Christ made, and the breadth of the injustice and evil that required it.

But that was C.S. Lewis' point, after all. The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe was an allegory of Christ's life, death, and resurrection. People used to write to him and say, "I'm worried that I love Aslan more than Christ;" and he would write back, "Don't worry, if you love Aslan you do love Christ."² That truth becomes even clearer when we recognize that Christ himself was called "the Lion of Judah" thousands of years before Lewis lived and dreamed of Narnia.

Why was Jesus called this? He certainly didn't seem fierce or particularly regal riding into Jerusalem on a little donkey the first Palm Sunday. But Christians who saw him in that parade saw Jesus as a king nevertheless, in part because the prophet Zechariah had prophesied that God's chosen king would ride into Jerusalem triumphant and victorious, humble, riding on a donkey. (*Zech.* 9:9). They also came to see Christ as a lion in part because a prophecy in *Isaiah* 31 paints a picture of the kingdom of God being ushered in by God descending upon Mt. Zion like a lion. "As a lion, a young lion roars over its prey, and, when a band of shepherds are appointed against it, it is not broken up at their shouting or checked at their tumult, so the kingdom of the Lord of hosts will be revealed to settle upon the Mount of Zion and upon its hill." (*Is.* 31:4). All the pieces of Jesus' life just seemed to fit this image. Jesus was a descendant of the tribe of Judah, which was represented with a lion because Judah, himself, was called "the little lion." The star of Bethlehem which signified his birth, was most likely a supernova or an unusual conjunction of stars in the constellation Leo.³ So after Jesus' death and resurrection, when the early Christians recognized without a doubt that he clearly was God's chosen king, God's Messiah, it was only natural that Jesus would be referred to as "the lion of Judah." Thus *Revelation* 5:5 proclaims: "Do not weep. The Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered..."

² See e.g. Kenney, Tyler, "C. S. Lewis on Loving Aslan More Than Jesus," *desiring God* website, Dec. 12, 2010, retrieved Mar. 19, 2018 from <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/c-s-lewis-on-loving-aslan-more-than-jesus>

³ See e.g. Kidger, Mark, *The Star of Bethlehem: An Astronomer's View* (Princeton: Princeton Press, 1999).

If we think of Jesus as a lion, as Aslan even, that may make it easier for us to embrace the kind of king that he was, because it's a different image from the typical ones we carry in our heads of kings as a warrior-dictators wearing crowns, or powerless figureheads of otherwise democratic countries. But that doesn't change the fact that Christ our King can feel as elusive as Aslan did to the residents of Narnia when it was frozen by the White Witch; likewise, our acknowledging that one of the offices of Christ Calvin identified as king doesn't change the fact that Jesus' kingdom still feels "not of this world" and totally out of reach. "I believe" we can affirm with our minds in here, while still praying "Help my unbelief" in our hearts when we go home. So I want to offer you two other lion images, which I think are very helpful. They come from the experience of Vincent Donovan, who was a missionary to the Masai in Africa.

Donovan had personal experience with the kind of heart prayer that comes from having doubts about God. When he set out to save the Masai, he was filled with the love of Christ and the determination to serve him well. But as soon as he spent some time with the Masai, he discovered that their language limited how he could explain the Gospel, and their culture limited what they could understand of it. The more he tried to explain salvation through Christ and the kingdom of God on earth to the people in their language, the more muddled his teaching and understanding became until instead of bringing the Masai to faith, Donovan found himself losing his own. He wrote, "I can sympathize with and feel with young Americans... who are going through the agony of unbelief. I used to think that faith was a head trip, a kind of intellectual assent to the truths and doctrines of religion.... But when my faith began to be shattered, I did not hurt in my head. I hurt all over."⁴

Several months later, in an attempt to help the missionary, a Masai elder came to talk to Donovan. First, he pointed out to him that the word Donovan had been using to convey "faith" in the Masai language was not a very good one. It meant only "to agree to." The elder said in a disparaging way that "to believe" like that was to be like a white hunter shooting an animal with his gun from a great distance. Only his eyes and his fingers take part in the act. The elder said for a man really to believe, he must be "like a lion going after its prey. His nose and eyes and ears pick up the prey. His legs give him the speed to catch it. As the animal goes down the lion envelops it in his arms, pulls it to himself and makes it part of himself. This is the way a lion kills. This is the way a man believes. This is what faith is."⁵

Donovan was amazed by the man's description of faith as a full-body, total heart, mind, soul, and strength commitment. He realized then that he had believed with his head but not with his whole self, which is why he had been overcome with doubts. He hadn't been a lion in his pursuit of God. But when Donovan started to confess this, the man interrupted him to continue the lesson. "We did not search you out, Padri," he said. "We did not even want you to come. You searched us out. You followed us wherever we went. You told us of the High God, how we must search for him, even leave our land and people to find him. But we have not done this. He has searched for us. He has searched us out and found us. All the time we think we are the lion. In the end the lion is God."⁶

⁴ Donovan, Vincent J. Christianity Rediscovered (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1978),48.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

The lion is God. Without knowing that Scripture calls Christ our King the lion of Judah, without knowing about C.S. Lewis or Aslan or Narnia, the Masai elder was able to convey the lesson that we recognize in Holy Week. Jesus came to search humanity out, not the other way around. He came to tell us that God is love, that grace changes everything, and that the kingdom of God is real. Although the authorities did not want him to preach, he did it anyway. Although the authorities did not want him to heal, he did it anyway. Although the authorities did not want him to come to Jerusalem, he did anyway. “You can’t stop this,” he told them. “If you tried even the stones would cry out the truth.” Jesus came to meet us where we are, with our inadequate faith and our incomplete understandings of God, and our doubts about the kingdom. Christ came to tell the truth that the kingdom breaks through whenever we love one another as God loves us. The kingdom breaks through when we practice justice and care for the “least of these.” The kingdom of God is not “of” this world in the sense that greed and violence and hatred and lies have no place in it. But it is not so otherworldly that we cannot experience it. We can experience it because Jesus was God stepping through the wardrobe to bring Narnia to us here. Like a lion, he came to wrap us in the arms of God’s grace, to make us one with him, and never let us go.

Do you feel like you seek God without success? Do you look at the world and find it hard to believe that the kingdom Jesus came to proclaim could possibly be real? Are you thirsty as Jill was? Then I invite you to invest your whole self in Holy Week because the whole week is about recognizing the lengths to which God went to come to us, to save us from ourselves, and to reveal the truth of the kingdom. This week presents us with a choice. We can be fickle like the people in the crowd, pledging our allegiance to Jesus one minute and to the powers that be the next. We can be cynical like Pilate and respond to Jesus’ proclamation that he came to speak the truth, with a sarcastic “What is truth?” We can try to hold the Gospel in our minds, knowing that things like otherworldly kingdoms and resurrection of the dead are all but impossible to understand logically. Or, we can choose today to put our trust in our king and go all in for God like a lion seeking prey. If and when we do the latter, then we discover that it is really God who is the lion. God came in Christ to claim us. So we do not have to look very far to find Aslan, nor do we have to wait very long to experience the grace of God’s kingdom. God is here, the kingdom is here, because God is a better lion than we are. God does not wait for us to come to him, nor does God promise to leave us alone. And nothing we do can chase him away.

In Lewis’ book The Voyage of the Dawn Treader, the time comes when the youngest of the Pevensie children, Lucy, has grown up enough that she must leave Narnia to live in the real world. She worries that in the real world, which is so very different from Narnia, she will never see Aslan again. Aslan offers her these words of advice. As you watch the video clip,⁷ know that the Lion of Judah, Christ our Savior and King, is with you always. This is the truth that he proclaimed the first Holy Week with his life; trust and believe that his grace has the power to change our lives and our world. Amen.

[Video clip: “Aslan: In Your World I am Known by Another Name” shown.]

⁷ Video clip of Aslan explaining that in the real world he is known by another name, and that she must also come to know him by that name. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ctz5yGHNjFU>