

Jesus on the Move
First Baptist Richmond, February 28, 2010
The Second Sunday in Lent
Luke 13:31-35

During some of the worst of the wintry weather we've had in the last couple of months, and on a day when she was feeling particularly, and perhaps hopelessly, snowbound, my friend Phyllis wrote on her Facebook page: "*OK, I'm ready for Aslan to show up and break the hold the White Witch has on creation. Yes, I know Aslan shows up unbidden, but in case he's on Facebook I want him to know the faithful are ready.*" A few of Phyllis's Facebook friends may not have understood the reference, but I did. On the shelves of my boyhood home there was a collection of hardbound books called "The Chronicles of Narnia," by C. S. Lewis. My brothers and I just called them "the Narnia books." I don't know where they came from. I don't know who paid for them. But I do know that—other than my parents—those books had more to do with my becoming a Christian than any other influence on my young life.

They told the stories of a magical land called Narnia, where animals could talk and time stood still and all the old virtues of chivalry were still intact. Narnia was always entered by magic—by stepping into a wardrobe or into a painting or, in my case, by reading about it in those magical books. I felt that I was right there with the Pevensie children, with Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy as they entered the wardrobe for the first time and found themselves in the middle of a wintry wood in Narnia. In that first adventure they discover that Narnia is under the spell of a White Witch who makes it always winter there—always winter and never Christmas. The gentle talking beasts of

Narnia are in despair. But still there is hope. One of them, a beaver, takes the children into his confidence and whispers to them in that same wood,

“They say Aslan is on the move.”

“And now a very curious thing happened,” Lewis writes. “None of the children knew who Aslan was any more than you do; but the moment the Beaver had spoken these words everyone felt quite different. Perhaps it has sometimes happened to you in a dream that someone says something which you don’t understand but in the dream it feels as if it had some enormous meaning—either a terrifying one which turns the whole dream into a nightmare or else a lovely meaning too lovely to put into words, which makes the dream so beautiful that you remember it all your life and are always wishing you could get into that dream again. It was like that now. At the name of Aslan each one of the children felt something jump in his inside. Edmund felt a sensation of mysterious horror. Peter felt suddenly brave and adventurous. Susan felt as if some delicious smell or some delightful strain of music had just floated by her. And Lucy got the feeling you have when you wake up in the morning and realise that it is the beginning of the holidays or the beginning of summer.”¹

Later, when the children have had their supper, the Beaver tells them that although their troubles are serious things will be better now that Aslan is on the move. “Oh, yes! Tell us about Aslan!” they say. And the Beaver tells them that Aslan is the King. The Lord of the whole wood. That he hasn’t been in Narnia for generations, but now that he is here he will put everything right as it says in an old rhyme:

*Wrong will be right, when Aslan comes in sight,
At the sound of his roar, sorrows will be no more,
When he bares his teeth, winter meets its death*

¹ C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (New York: Collier, 1970), pp. 64-65.

And when he shakes his mane, we shall have spring again.

For Aslan, in this and all the Narnia books, is not a man but a lion—a great lion who is both fierce and gentle, stern and loving, serious and playful. He is the King of the Wood and the son of the Great Emperor-Beyond-the-Sea. He is on the move, and all Narnia trembles with the implications.

It isn't hard to see that when C. S. Lewis, who was a devout Christian, wrote that description of Aslan, he was thinking about Jesus, and it isn't hard to see in our Gospel reading for today a Jesus who is also on the move, and all Israel trembling with the implications. He is on his way to Jerusalem, whose children he longs to gather under his wings as a mother hen gathers her chicks, and nothing, not even a death threat from Herod, is going to stop him. But before we go with him any farther we might want to pause and remember how he got to this point.

In the beginning, Jesus wasn't moving toward Jerusalem. He was moving *away* from Jerusalem, preaching and teaching and healing and staying one step ahead of the religious authorities who wanted to keep him quiet. Whenever he healed people he would warn them not to tell. In much of his preaching and teaching he seemed deliberately vague, as if he didn't want anyone to know what he was really up to. I picture Jesus in these early chapters of Luke moving quickly, constantly looking over his shoulder, hoping not to get caught. He was on the move all right, or to be more honest about it, he was on the run—like a fugitive—staying just out of reach of the authorities. He slipped away from them in Capernaum, Cana, and Nazareth. He kept moving, even venturing over into the Gentile region of Tyre and Sidon. Eventually he traveled as far north as Caesarea Philippi, up on the slopes of Mount Hermon, and it was there that he

stopped to catch his breath and ask the question: “Who do people say that I am?” The disciples told him what others were saying about him but when he asked what they thought Peter said, “You’re God’s anointed one: the Messiah.”

And that’s when Jesus stopped running. Right there he stopped and turned around and set his face toward Jerusalem, as if that word from Peter had been all he was waiting for, as if this whole preaching and teaching and healing tour had been for that purpose—to show his disciples who he really was. He told them to keep quiet about it and then he said, “You know what’s going to happen, don’t you? They’re not going to have a thing to do with me. The chief priests and elders and scribes would sooner kill me than let me be their Messiah. And they will. But that won’t be the end of it. That won’t be the end of me.” And with that he started off down the road toward Jerusalem.

The disciples looked at each other for a minute and then fell in behind him. For a while nobody said anything and then Jesus asked, “Do you know what you’re getting yourselves into? If you want to follow me you’re going to have to deny yourselves. In fact, you might as well plan to die right along with me. Take up your cross and start carrying it because you never know when you might need it. But I’ll tell you this: if you try to save your life you’ll end up losing it anyway. If you give it up willingly for my sake you’ll save it.” That’s the paradox of the gospel: that life is like love. Keep it to yourself and it will dry up and disappear; give it away and it will come back in buckets.

But it is a strange invitation, isn’t it? Jesus asks his disciples to deny themselves, to take up their crosses, to follow him to certain death, all the while insisting that the only life worth living is the life they will find at the end of that road. Did they go? Apparently so. Would you? Well, that’s the question. This whole season we call Lent is

an invitation to walk with Jesus on the way that leads to death, or life, or both. It is the second half of a journey that begins with Jesus' baptism. There he hears the voice of God calling him the beloved son, he goes into the wilderness to spend forty days figuring out what that means, and then he goes into Galilee teaching and preaching and healing. On the church calendar we call that half of the journey Epiphany; it is that time when the divine light begins to shine on Jesus, getting brighter and brighter until finally, on a mountaintop in Galilee, Jesus is lit up by a radiance that lends credence to God's claim, "This is my son, my chosen." It is that time when we are asked to decide if God is telling the truth, and whether or not we will listen to his chosen one.

But be careful. If you decide that God is telling the truth about this man from Nazareth, if you decide that you should listen to him and follow him, then the second half of the journey begins, and it is that journey we call Lent. Do you see it? There is Epiphany, a long arc outward, leading away from Jerusalem, and there is Lent, a long arc inward, leading back to that place where Jesus will die. It is a journey that leads to sackcloth and ashes, weeping and repentance. It may even lead to death. Why would you do it? Why would you follow Jesus on the second half of his journey? Only because you had become convinced in the first half that he was who he said he was, and there was really no other choice for you. Or because you believed what he told you—that losing your life for his sake is the only way to find it—and realizing that once you volunteer to die there is nothing left to fear.

When we catch up with Jesus in our Gospel reading for today he is certainly living by that second principle. Some apparently friendly Pharisees warn him that Herod is trying to kill him but he doesn't care. He is a man on a mission. His mission will lead

to his own death. With that fact established what can a death threat do to him? “Listen,” he says, “Go tell that fox that today I cast out demons and tomorrow I cure the sick and the third day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside Jerusalem.” In other words Jesus is on the move. Like Aslan in the story he has come to set things right. And while the right thing is hardly ever the easy thing no one, least of all Herod, is going to stop him. So, the question is not whether Jesus is going to Jerusalem, but whether or not we are going with him. It would make sense to say no, but there is something about him that is so compelling we want to say yes. Is it because he knows Lent is not the end of the journey, but only the middle? Is it because he knows the journey that begins with Epiphany and continues in Lent ends with Easter? That the arc outward and the arc inward are followed by an arc upward?

That’s how it is in the story C. S. Lewis tells.

Aslan is on the move, all right, but his journey, like that of Jesus, leads to his own death. It isn’t easy to set things right. There is always a price to pay. In this case Aslan offers his own life in exchange for the life of one of the Pevensie children, Edmund, who has betrayed his brother and sisters to the White Witch. The Witch is glad to have Aslan in exchange. Along with a crowd of her evil cronies she binds him, shaves off his mane, heaves him onto an ancient stone table, and stabs him through the heart. All through the night the two girls who have followed him—Susan and Lucy—weep over his dead body and wonder how such a thing could have happened to him. But in the morning, just as the sun is peeping up over the horizon, there is a loud crack and the stone table breaks in two, and when they whirl around they see Aslan golden in the sunrise, shaking his mane, and very much alive. When they ask what it all means Aslan says that though the White

Witch knew the Deep Magic, there is a deeper magic still. And although Aslan doesn't say it we who are Christians know it to be true, that the deep magic of Lent is followed by the still deeper magic of Easter.

Perhaps this is why we can walk with Jesus toward Jerusalem. Because he has broken the spell of death and we no longer have any reason to be afraid. We can say with the Psalmist, "The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life, of whom shall I be afraid?" Even death is not the end for those who walk with Jesus. So go tell that fox, Herod, and anyone else who would keep us from our mission—Jesus is on the move, and we are moving with him, and nothing is going to stop us. As my friend Phyllis might say,

"The faithful are ready."

—*Jim Somerville, 2010*