

GOD ON THE MOVE

Advent 2, Cycle A: Isaiah 11:1-10; Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12

In C. S. Lewis's ground-breaking children's book *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, we enter an imaginary world called Narnia which, although it is a wonderful magical place, is also disturbingly similar to our own world in which the forces of good and evil are clearly in evidence. Lewis describes the Narnia we encounter at the beginning of the book as a land where it is always winter, but never Christmas; and that image of goodness never finding fulfillment lies at the heart of the plot. Narnia is ruled by Jadis, known in the book as the White Witch who, we learn as we read, turns anyone who opposes her into stone.

The force for good in the Narnia Chronicles – *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* is the first book in a series of seven – is Aslan, the Lion. Like all the animals in this magical kingdom, Aslan talks; and at length, Aslan is disclosed not just as the force for good in Narnia and the one who will eventually defeat the White Witch, but also as a Christ figure who will give his life for Edmund, one of the children in the book who, himself, struggles with the forces of good and evil, having been enchanted by the White Witch.

When the children first enter Narnia altogether, they become aware that although it is magical and full of wonder for them, everyone in Narnia lives in fear and uncertainty because the White Witch is very much in control. Her power is absolute, and she wants it to remain that way. It is Mr. Beaver, though, who befriends the four children, Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy, who intuitively change in this changeless world. "Aslan is on the move," he tells the children; and with that quiet comment, the forces for good begin to coalesce as all the animals, the four children, and Aslan rise to counter the White Witch and her army. "Aslan is on the move" becomes an amazingly powerful statement in the book, perhaps because of its understatement, perhaps because of the hope it brings to all those who live each moment of each day in fear for their lives. In going over our readings for this morning earlier this week, I remembered C. S. Lewis's book and Mr. Beaver's comment. Our Bible readings are very much in parallel with the hope that gathers in the first two-thirds of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*; although in the biblical context, it is God who is "on the move."

The images in our readings this morning also have power: the shoot springing out of the stump of a tree that was given up for dead; our world transformed from wild and dangerous to ordered and safe, the so-called peaceable kingdom in which the "wolf shall live with the lamb, [and] the leopard shall lie down with the kid." The apostle Paul recognizing that the heart of God is as big as the world, loving all people with the same passion as has been held for generation upon generation for those God called the chosen ones; and then putting himself on the line in what is clearly an environment hostile to his teaching – calling for welcome of those who are so different, who are not like God's chosen people; calling for full integration of Gentiles and Jews in this new community of God's making through the birth, life, ministry, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus. "May [we] live in harmony with one another," Paul writes, "in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together [we] may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

And then, in our Gospel, John, so full of the vision of God on the move, that he calls people to prepare themselves for an intervention, the likes of which they have never before seen. The world is soon to be turned inside out and upside down, John proclaims: it will be both terrible and wonderful at the same time, for all those who are now mired in sin and self-satisfaction are to be washed and purified by the Holy Spirit; the old order is passing away; baptism signals the beginning of the new age. God is on the move!

The gospel Jesus taught and lived and embodied is nothing less than the message John proclaimed for those who gathered to hear his prophecy and undergo his ritual cleansing in the Jordan. And, as we acquaint ourselves with the gospels and the writings of Saint Paul, it is much, much more. The author of our First Reading suggests that the root of Jesse will be a sign or an ensign to all the people of the new world order the writer describes with such beauty and eloquence. And Christians, when we read this passage, think not of Hezekiah, who may have been the messianic hope of the Isaiah passage, but of Jesus – because we know the power of his proclamation; we know the power of his gospel. If anything

can change our world from its corrupt ways and intention toward self-destruction, it is the Word of God proclaimed in the gift of Jesus Christ and his gospel. God is on the move!

But, we read in Matthew's gospel, renewal and rebirth do not happen without our involvement: "bear fruit worthy of repentance," the Baptist says to the holy people who have come from Jerusalem to see what all the fuss is about. "Bear fruit worthy of receiving the gospel," John says to you and me, two thousand years later as we ponder the meaning of Christmas in our time and place.

Last week, I preached on Pope Francis and his recent exhortation entitled "The Joy of the Gospel". As you know if you were here last week or have read or seen the sermon on-line, I love this proclamation: it is, in light of all the *status quo* papacies we have had since the papacy of John XXIII, when I was a child, a breath of fresh air and a document of unparalleled courage. If Francis did not have enemies before publishing *The Joy of the Gospel*, he certainly has them now. No sacred cow of the Establishment or the elite was left untouched, and especially the sacred cows the church itself has been protecting.

But then, Alicia [Becker] spoke last Sunday of the fall of Communism and the dismantling of the Berlin Wall in 1989. And this week, the death of Nelson Mandela has essentially brought the world to its knees in homage to the world-changing forces this freedom-fighter gathered in order to transform Apartheid South Africa into a nation that is now free to discover the riches and potential it has in its grasp.

It is Advent, that season of the year that opens the door a crack to hope and promise. In people such as Francis and Nelson Mandela we see examples of those who bear fruit and become the proclamation of a world transformed by gospel values.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who has worked so closely with Nelson Mandela in refashioning the new South Africa, was asked this week about how unique Nelson Mandela was. It was a question which may have been predicated on President Obama's comment that "we'll never see another like him in our time." Desmond Tutu said, "Nelson Mandela was not an anomaly." He said, "We all have the capacity within ourselves to do the things that Nelson Mandela did; to live out the values and hopes and principles that brought Nelson Mandela to the forefront of the resistance in South Africa." In other words, Nelson Mandela is a sign for us of how possible change is; of what our world can be like, if we truly believe that "God is on the move."