

Isaiah 61 Poet and Prophet (Part II) 12.11.05

(Magic trick with a rose)

Do you believe in magic?

Not magic like a magic that is practiced by Siegfried and Roy and Penn and Teller?

Not a magic that is a mix of incantations and dolls like voodoo.

No, do you believe in a magic that is wonder and surprise?

Do you believe in magic that is joy?

You may be wondering, where am I going with this but today I want to invite you to go on a journey with me on the edges of magic and joy.

Today, the church focuses on joy.

We light the candle of joy on the third Sunday of Advent knowing full well that we're close to the darkest day of the year.

We light a pink candle that is different from all the rest of the candles because it is different than hope, peace or love.

We light the candle of joy recognizing that joy is the least predictable and perhaps the most longed for.

So let me return to the question, "Do you believe in magic? Do you believe in magic that is surprise and wonder and joy?"

This week, in theaters across the nation, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* is being released.

The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe is at its heart is a story about magic.

Yes it is about good and evil,

yes it is one of the most creative retelling of Christ's passion for humanity,

yes it is written in the shadow of war torn Europe and it speaks about the tragedies of not taking a stand to those who would rule with fear and lies.

But in many ways it is about magic, magic in its best sense.

Magic that arrives in the worst of times.

Magic that can not be controlled.

Magic that surprises and terrifies.

Magic that is unpredictable.

Lucy, Edmund, Susan and Peter live in London with their mom.

Dad is off fighting the war.

In the city, the bombing is getting worse and worse and eventually mom feels she has no choice but to send the children to the countryside where they will be sheltered from the many horrors of war.

But now they are confined to a cold mansion with a dictator for a housekeeper,

and a professor who lurks about the shadows.

Dad is gone to war, mom is left in the city, and the kids are trapped in a damp, dark country castle.

When suddenly, like magic, Lucy enters a wardrobe that has no back.

Trying to hide from the others she moves further and further back until she trips and lands in snow and finds herself in Narnia.

A land of fresh snow, talking animals, and a fawn, named Mr. Tumnus.

The fawn is terrified of Lucy and hides from her.

And after this young little girl coaxes him out,

He asks her:

“Are you a daughter of Eve?”

She says:

“I’m a girl, silly.”

“You mean you are in fact human.”

And he says it with such wonder, such fear, for a moment, we realize what a miracle it is to be *human*.

The tale of mystery and magic unfolds.

We meet the white witch with her power to command wolves,

turn knights into stone,

and create Turkish Delight from snow.

She uses her magic to dictate,

control,

and hold people in fear.

She uses magic to keep Christmas at bay.

In Narnia, Spring never comes,

it’s always cold.

and Christmas hasn’t been celebrated for 100 years.

But they say that Aslan is on the move.

Aslan, the real king is sweeping through the land.

Did you hear our Old Testament lesson this morning?

The parallels between Narnia and Israel are overwhelming.

Israel too has been held in bondage for far too long.

They have been held captive in Babylon for more than 100 years.

When they finally return to their homes there is nothing but ruin.

When they return to their land it is like an evil queen has cast a spell.
People live in fear.
First their city was destroyed and taken by the Assyrians.
Then it was taken by the Babylonians.
And now that the two great empires have lessened their grip,
they have little hope, because nothing is like it was.

And then Isaiah speaks, and it is like the spirit of God moving across the waters, or a lion's roar echoing through its kingdom.

And Isaiah says:

**The Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives
and release to the prisoners,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.**

Into the land of ruin Isaiah speaks, and says:

“You shall build up the ancient ruins,
...you shall repair the ruined cities,
...For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
and as garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,
so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up.”

One of the most breathtaking scenes of the movie, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* is the coming of Spring.

Life can not be held back.

Unlike our Spring that happens over months, when Aslan is on the move, trees come to life before your eyes, grass grows under foot, it is pure magic.

The prophet and the poet compare the coming of God
to Spring.

Perhaps the parallels between Isaiah and *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* shouldn't surprise us. The story of goodness being truer than evil, life being stronger than death,
and love outlasting hate is our story.

It is the story of Isaiah and the story of our faith.

But there are some things that do surprise me.

Here we are, celebrating JOY.

At the same time, a children's classic is being released in theatres around the country.

And what is the title of the author's autobiography.

C. S. Lewis, autobiography is titled, *Surprised by...*

Joy.

I don't want to make too much of this coincidences but I do want to say something about Joy.

Because JOY is our focus of the day.

Our scripture lesson points to JOY.

And JOY is woven through *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, and the back story of Lewis' faith.

In *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis tells us something about the nature of joy when he speaks about his childhood and his parents.

He says his father was never happier than when he was spinning a tale or sharing an anecdote with his uncles.

And his mother had refined the art of being happy.

But although there were moments of pleasure and happiness in his family, never joy.

You see, joy is different.

Joy can not be purchased.

Joy arrives at the most unexpected times.

Joy is less dependent on circumstances.

Joy is different. And here is how.

To the people of Israel, ripped away from their home, held in captivity, and then finally released,

To a people who returned to their homes and found nothing but rubble, aware of their pain, aware of their disappointment,

Isaiah says something that is so peculiar.

Isaiah says:

"I will rejoice in the Lord."

In other words, I will be joyous.

And we are given a window into joy.

Joy isn't dependent on our setting or circumstance or what surrounds us.
Joy comes from another place.
Joy ... comes from God.
Joy comes from inside.
Joy is the Spirit testifying inside of us that
despite everything you see I believe God is good.
Despite everything you see I believe that God is not dead.
Despite everything you see I believe God has a plan for my life.

One of the most disappointing things to me about the movie *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe* is the portrayal of Aslan.
The special affects are great. Aslan is one exceptionally cool lion, but my memory of Aslan was different.
I remember Aslan being so magnificent, so grand, that I was almost afraid.
In the book, Aslan's breath turned stone to life, but at the same time you felt that his breath could melt you to nothing.
A misdirected roar could scorch a plain.
The movie's Aslan was far too tame and gentle.

In the book, the Lion came and went as he pleased,
and could never be controlled or domesticated.
I like the book's lion better than the movies because for me,
the spiritual life has seasons of joy, warmth, richness and fullness, and there are other times when it is like waiting in the desert.
There are times when the lion seems far away.
This thing called joy that we celebrate today can not be controlled.
Being full of joy is like making someone fall in love with you.
You can buy the flowers, write songs, and tell your best stories, but you **can't** make someone fall in love with you.
It's a gift.
This thing called joy, this gift called faith, and this presence that we celebrate as Christ is not able to be controlled. Sometimes Christ comes close and it is as if we are touching the lion's mane, and other times, it feels as if the lion has been gone for far too long.

What I want to say today is ...if you don't feel JOY, that's OK, if you don't feel God's presence that is OK too, if Christ seems distant that's OK too.

Things happen in this world of ours that may make us feel as if it is winter all the time.

Lewis didn't marry until late in his life, and when he did.

The person who he adored so much was diagnosed with cancer and eventually died.

In one of the most poignant scenes of the movie *Shadowlands*, recounting the love story of Lewis and Joy Davidman, he tells the president of his college, a friend and also his minister, he just doesn't understand, and far too many of his prayers have been met with silence.

For Lewis, who wrote *Surprised by Joy*, he confessed that JOY had been covered by the winter of death.

And that is the most important point I want to make today about joy,

It is natural for JOY to be covered by the winter of death.

Holidays can be tough. I recognize for many there will be an empty chair at Christmas. Some people have died

and some people are not present because they choose to be somewhere else.

So let me try to summarize what we have said on this journey around the edges of joy.

What can we say about JOY?

1. Joy is not dependent on our circumstances, look at Isaiah.
2. Joy can not be bought, happiness and pleasure can be purchased, but not joy, joy is different
3. We do not control joy, look at Aslan the Lion in *the Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*; Joy (loosely translated "the experience of God's presence") can not be controlled. Joy is a gift from God.
4. Finally, it is OK if joy is the last thing on your mind or in your heart this Christmas.

But here is why we light a candle of joy today even though joy may be the most distant feeling in our heart.

We believe this day is about more than us.

We believe that despite the cold and darkening days of winter, Spring will come.

We believe that despite the witches of winter, there is a force that is far more powerful.

In a land of beasts, we believe that there is a king.
A king whose goodness knows absolutely no bounds.
And while others practice magic, there is a deeper magic
Something that goes back to the beginning of all time.
Something deeper more powerful than 100 years without Christmas.
And in this season of darkness, where we wait and wait and wait, we believe
that magic
is Christ.

And we rejoice today, because we believe that deep magic waits for us.
It calls to us from a cross.
It shows us a love that has no bounds.
It lays bare and wounded on the cross.
And it gives us the power to do all things.
To love those we thought we could not love.
To forgive those we thought we could not forgive.
To live without fear of death.
To live for others in a way so the world may say:
“See what love they have for the world, surely they are the children of God.”

So we light a candle of joy, knowing that the light shines in the darkness and
the darkness did not overcome it.
Amen