

Going and Coming

A sermon for Ascension Sunday

Acts 1:6-11, 1st Peter 5: 6-11

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Spring has sprung! Let's pause and be grateful that last winter is over. The snow has gone, the green of summer has come back. New life is everywhere, let us hope with joy!



Today we celebrate two things that sometimes fall together this third Sunday of May. Every year we honor our graduates from both high school and college before they go on to their next life adventure. During years when Pentecost falls on Memorial Day weekend, we remember how Christ went to heaven, and renew our hope he will come again. Going and coming is the theme that links them both. Going and coming is such a huge theme for the Church. We often refer to specific times in our life as a journey, experiencing life as a spiritual pilgrimage.

Our reading from Acts tells us about Jesus leaving earth to return to eternal life with his Father. “. . . As his disciples were watching, he was lifted up and a cloud took him out of their sight.” (Acts 1:9) Once again, angels in white robes ask the disciples why they are standing around. “Why do you stand looking up toward heaven. This Jesus, who has been taken up . . . will come in the same way as you saw him go.” (Acts 1:11) One gets the impression angels believe humans are slow learners.

Our other reading from St. Peter's letter to the church comes from the awful time when the Emperor Nero thought mixing hungry lions and Christians in a public amphitheater was entertainment. Because he knew his readers were very much at risk of just such a death, Peter wrote “your adversary the devil (prowling like) a roaring lion . . . looking for someone to devour.” (1 Peter 5:8)

Work on this sermon began where most sermons began, I simply reread the passages the worship team chose weeks ago in an unmarked Bible while making notes in my sermon writing notebook.ⁱ As I wrote “evil = a roaring lion” in my notes, this thought popped into my mind, “I wonder what Peter would have thought of Aslan?”

It was amusing to imagine St. Peter, who here compared evil to a prowling lion, reading *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*ⁱⁱ on a break from tending the pearly gates. The talking lion Aslan is a fantasy writer's Christ figure in *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*. Could St. Peter accept this plot twist, one so much like Jesus' parables? Well probably, but not a useful "the Bible as literature" lecture for us to consider today.

What is useful for us today is pondering how Christ's return to Earth is mirrored in Aslan's return to Narnia. In *The Lion, The Witch, & The Wardrobe*, Aslan is to Narnia what Christ is to Earth. C. S. Lewis, a British professor of classic literature, wrote *The Lion, The Witch, & The Wardrobe* for a real girl named Lucy lived in his country home during World War II to be kept safe from the blitzkriegs in London. The lion is Aslan, the witch is the villain, and the wardrobe is the portal by which the four Pevensey children go to Narnia.ⁱⁱⁱ

Did you read *The Lion, The Witch, & The Wardrobe* as a child? Have you read *The Lion, The Witch, & The Wardrobe* as an adult? If you have not read it, possibly your grade school library treated it as a banned book because of its resurrection scene was too "mystical."^{iv} But no matter what, I recommend it for your reading this summer. As Lewis wrote, "No book is really worth reading at the age of ten which is not equally – and often far more – worth reading at the age of fifty and beyond."^v Not only that, but God always seems to prefer a good story over any overthought tome on Christian ethics. Here are the important bits that will help you understand why I see Christ's presence in our lives today so much like Aslan's presence in Narnia.

The adventure in Narnia began when Lucy, the youngest of the four Pevensey children, hid in a wardrobe while playing hide and seek. As Lucy stepped behind the coats, the wardrobe had no back. Soon, Lucy was walking near a lamppost in a snow-covered wood where she met Mr. Tumnus, a faun. In Narnia fauns are real while humans are a mythical. Mr. Tumnus told her about the White Witch, whose magic made Narnia always winter and never Christmas. Lucy also learned that when Aslan returned, winter would melt away.

The second time Lucy went to Narnia, the younger of her two brothers, Edmund, went with her. The White Witch found Edmund alone and seduced him to join her side with candy. She sent Edmund to go back to the wardrobe with Lucy and come back with the two oldest children, Peter and Susan.

Edmund failed to follow the White Witch's instructions perfectly, but he did trick Peter and Susan to go into the wardrobe. Hoping to be the White Witch's

favorite and have more of her wonderful candy, Edmond snuck off from the other children, and missed getting his special gift from Father Christmas as the snow melted and rumors of Aslan's return spread everywhere. The White Witch's anger put Edmond in mortal jeopardy, but Aslan intervened and took Edmond's place on the stone table used for execution. Just like Christ, after Aslan died in place of Edmond, Aslan rose again, and the Witch with her evil ways was defeated. (By the way, this death and resurrection scene Lewis drew directly from the Bible is why *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe* was banned in the children's literature section of public libraries.)

There is so much more to the story, but I do not want to spoil anyone else's first read of *The Lion, The Witch, & The Wardrobe*. What is important for us now in our hard times is how Aslan's coming and going in Narnia mirrors Christ's going and coming in our lives. By blending the Gospel plot with his expertise in Greek mythology, Lewis wrote this classic fantasy of children's literature to spark our hope to for Christ to come when we least expect him, even during World War II.

When Lewis wrote *The Lion, The Witch, & The Wardrobe*, our world was in a global conflict and many, many people were acting like either the White Witch or Edmond before Aslan came to redeem Narnia. And there were other people behaved like Lucy and Mr. Tumnus aligning their lives with Christ, including Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien (Lewis' friend), and Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Likewise, both St. Peter and St. Luke, the writers of today's Bible readings, wrote when many people were acting like the White Witch and Edmond as others chose to follow Christ on "The Way"^{vi}. Sometimes evil takes the form of a prowling lion, other times the form of a beautiful woman in white with candy, sometimes—well, what form does evil take in your life?

Christ comes in seasons of struggle, his love redeeming seasons we could describe as "always winter, but never Christmas." Wouldn't it be amazing to see Christ coming and going from heaven like the angels on *Jacob's Ladder*?^{vii} Coming back to earth the same way the disciples saw him going to heaven? Someday perhaps we will. But then there is always what the angels say to humans whenever we stand in motionless wonder at a glimpse of heaven, "What are you doing standing here?"

When we stop our Bible reading at the point we did today, it is so easy to think that what the angels said to the disciples has to be literally true. As human earthlings, we think their words— "This Jesus, who has been taken up . . . will come in the same way as you saw him go." (Acts 1:11)—refers to the end of time, or at least the end of

our time on earth, just because of where we stopped reading. While we could be right, there could also be more meaning than the obvious meaning.

Luke was inspired to share those angels' words at the beginning of *The Acts of the Apostles* rather than at the end of *The Gospel of Jesus Christ*. There are no angels when Christ goes to heaven in Luke's Gospel (Lk. 24: 50-53). When Jesus, son of Mary, left there was no need for angels to announce the obvious. Angels only come because they have a message about our need to go. Whenever a Bible reading quotes an angel speaking God is beginning something new on earth. From angels' point of view on their stairway to and from heaven, Christ had to go to earth from heaven before he could come back to heaven from earth.

Someday, we will ascend to heaven, maybe even by climbing Jacob's ladder. Maybe even later today, like just five minutes from now. But right now, as you read this, there are angels praising Christ and St. Peter's message for us before he went to join Christ in heaven "Resist evil, go in steadfast faith with your brothers and sisters in Christ. Trust Christ to meet you when your fears are reasonable. Trust Christ to come and go with you again, and again, and again." (My paraphrase of 1st Peter 5: 6-10)

Amen.

ⁱ Here are two of several good reasons for this practice. First, when one copies a thought with a pen and paper rather than just run over it with a highlighter one pays better attention to every word. Second, by using an unmarked Bible a preacher reduces the risk of falling of using old thoughts from another time, and opens their mind to hearing what the Spirit has for the congregation this week's sermon is meant. You don't have to be a preacher to try using a notebook rather than a highlighter as you read your Bible.

ⁱⁱ First published in 1950 by Geoffrey Bles.

ⁱⁱⁱ Although written first, *The Lion, The Witch & The Wardrobe* is chronologically the second book of a series of seven books known collectively as *The Chronicles of Narnia*. If you want to read them in Narnian historical order, begin with *The Magician's Nephew* (1955) which explains how the wardrobe links Earth to Narnia. If you want to read them in the order written, begin with *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*. I would recommend reading in the order written.

^{iv} I ran into this detail on Wikipedia while doing my dates for footnotes, and I recalled that I first read *The Chronicles of Narnia* as a freshman in a Christian college where C. S. Lewis was strongly venerated by both English and theology professors. My children on the other hand, heard it as a chapter book I read to them before they could read chapter books on their own.

^v I memorized this quote as an undergraduate, and confirmed it with a quick Google search. This exact sentence is posted at www.goodreads.com.

^{vi} The Way is how Christians referred to themselves after Jesus ascension until Greek gentile followers coined the term "Christian" which literally means "little Christ."

^{vii} American folksong based on Genesis 28:10-22.