

Tender Mercy
A Sermon by the Rev. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian, New Canaan – December 5, 2021

Please read:
Philippians 1:3-11
Luke 1:68-79

Thanks to some very kind friends, Kim and I enjoyed the deconstructed 21st century version of Eurydice yesterday at the Met. It's a retelling of one of the more famous love stories of ancient Greek mythology. I won't try and retell that story here, as I'm still processing the rich libretto and stunning score, but it got me thinking about the importance of imagination, and how we are constantly called to deconstruct and reconstruct the message of the gospel for life today.

Some of you have asked me about why I sometimes refer to the "deeper magic" of Narnia. I highly recommend that you read *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, C.S. Lewis' classic story that begins the seven-volume set of adventures that gets at some of the most profound theological truths of Christian faith. It's what I call children's literature for adults. There is deep theological truth conveyed in Lewis' work, and his fantasy literature helps us to understand perhaps more than any dogmatic approach the meaning of what we are anticipating, expecting, and preparing for in these Sundays of Advent.

Advent candle-lighting and the Christmas birth narratives invite us to use our imagination to understand more fully how God comes to us. One of my favorite lines in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, is when Mr. Beaver explains to Susan (one of the children learning about the character of this King Aslan), "Aslan is a lion- the Lion, the great Lion." "Ooh" said Susan. "I'd thought he was a man. Is he-quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion"... "Safe?" said Mr. Beaver ... "Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you."

It's what this King does that makes him good. He gives himself as a sacrifice to save, to restore, to renew. Lewis writes about the universe being held together by a "Deep Magic." It's the law of justice, and when the law of the universe is broken, someone needs to pay. To rebel against magic's laws is to threaten widespread destruction. The White Witch, the antagonist in the Narnia stories, knows this deep magic of justice and uses it for her evil purposes. Her rule is one where it is always Winter, but never Christmas...

But Aslan knows of an even more basic truth, the truth of grace and mercy. The witch may use her deep magic to satisfy her lust for power. But there exists a Deeper Magic, which subverts the laws that govern the "ordinary" magical reality. As the story unfolds, this Deeper Magic raises Aslan from the dead and brings about an ultimate restoration of all things.

Aslan gives his life as a sacrifice but is raised from the dead. And the magical raising of Aslan has cosmic results. At the very least this kind of mysterious transaction opens us up to the profound teaching that "in Christ all shall be made alive."¹ Lewis is trying to bring alive the story that gospel writer Luke records as history.

¹ Richard Mouw, "Exploring the Deeper Magic" (*Beliefnet*, referenced Thursday, November 21, 2013: <http://www.beliefnet.com/Entertainment/Movies/The-Chronicles-Of-Narnia-Prince-Caspian/Exploring-The-Deeper-Magic.aspx>)

Our gospel text is the prophecy of Zechariah, father of John the Baptist. John the Baptist always seems to insinuate himself into the Advent season, but this year we hear about him through his father Zechariah. The prophecy talks about how his son, John, will be called the prophet of the Most High, and how he will go before the Lord to prepare his ways...

I find this passage one of the most beautiful in all of scripture, perhaps as it is included in the daily Oxford morning prayers. I often wonder if Lewis himself had this text written on his heart every morning? But here we learn the good news that "God has looked favorably upon his people and redeemed them." How has this happened? "He has raised up for us a mighty savior." Of course, Zechariah was proclaiming that the long awaited Messiah was on the way. This Mighty Savior would bring "salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins."

It's a strange prophecy, in that it makes clear God was not just going to use a human leader, but get *personally involved*, strong and mighty. And then in a poignant conclusion, we are told that "By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."

It's some of the most poetic lines in the New Testament, illustrating that this mighty savior is ushering in a new age, a new Kingdom, a new hope and peace for all people. This word peace of course, is in the Jewish mind, *shalom*, the code word for God's cosmic reclamation project of restoring all creation to *the way it's supposed to be*, the way it was intended before the Fall, before Adam and Eve were cast from Paradise, the Garden of Eden...

Which brings us to our Philippian text. How does the deeper magic of redemption get worked out in history? How will redemption, salvation, perfection of the vision of a new heaven and earth be brought to completion, as Paul asserts in this letter to his favorite church? This also requires some imagination...

Parker Palmer tells the story about how farmers during bleak winters across the Great Plains would get caught with little notice in blizzards that would cause "white-outs." In a white out, you can barely see a foot in front of you. Sometimes they would get disoriented and die of exposure to the elements near to their homes. So they would tie a rope from the barn to the house and in snow storms the rope would become a lifeline. They could not see the ground beneath their feet, but they could feel the grip of their hands on the steady strength of the rope. Interestingly, the word for hope in the Hebrew is *tikveh*, which means... rope!

The second story is from our devotional this past week, called "Sleeping with Bread." Orphans rescued from concentration camps at the end of World War II were taken to England to be placed with families. The workers caring for the children noticed how many couldn't sleep. They were afraid and anxious. So, each night the children were given a slice of bread to hold as they were tucked into bed. The workers discovered that the children had peace and slept better with bread in their hands. It eased their fears...

Our hope, you see, comes from outside of ourselves. We hold onto the promises of God and follow the way toward home... God's sure and solid guidance and direction will lead us to a better life and fairer world for all.

Our peace comes not because there is an absence of conflict, troubles, or even violence in our world. That's naïve. But in Christ we are given a tangible sign of the self-giving, sacrificial love of God.

G.K. Chesterton once reported that when he outgrew the nursery, he left the fairy tale books lying next to his crib, only to discover much later that they contained more wisdom than the many books he had read as an adult! Indeed, the vision of the new heaven and earth may sound like fairy tales, given the realities that we face on a day-to-day basis, but we also need to remember that there is this deeper magic of Jesus. It's conjured up by forgiveness, grace, and love. And if we are followers of Jesus and preparing in this Advent season for him to come again into our lives and world, then we too must enter the mysterious way of the cross, the way of forgiveness and love, even when it requires self-sacrifice and suffering. That's the way of the Deeper Magic of the Kingdom of Heaven.

So here's what I invite you to imagine this week... That Zechariah's prophecy is true for you... "And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."

From this table, receive a piece of bread, and internalize a visible sign of an invisible grace to remind you that Our hero, the Mighty Prince of Peace, continues to move in and through us with grace and love so we can be part of the change our world so desperately seeks. As we deconstruct and reconstruct, as we reimagine the way of love for today, people will see a magic that gives life! May the tender mercy of our God give us salvation; not to "save ourselves," but to save us from ourselves...so that we can give ourselves to others in love...

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.